



universität
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DIPLOMARBEIT

Titel der Diplomarbeit

“The Meta Boosh:
Forms and functions of metareference in the British
comedy series *The Mighty Boosh*”

Verfasserin

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angestrebter akademischer Grad

Magistra der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)

Wien, 2012

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt:

A 343

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt:

Anglistik und Amerikanistik

Betreuerin:

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Declaration of Authenticity

I confirm to have conceived and written this thesis in English all by myself. Quotations from sources are all clearly marked and acknowledged in the bibliographical references either in the footnotes or within the text. Any ideas borrowed and/or passages paraphrased from the works of other authors are truthfully acknowledged and identified in the footnotes.

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Hello, Mr Paper; where have you been?
I'd like to meet your family, and see what you've seen,
Now gather all your friends and stand up straight,
I'm gonna bind you up now.

Squash it up, squash it down, YES!
Crush it down, crush it down, NO!
Shower time ink splash colourful soap
Flick through my pages and have a little grope.

-The Flighty Zeus
The Mighty Book of Boosh, p.19

My thanks go to my supervisor, Prof. Eva Zettelmann, for reviving my enthusiasm for literature in a crowded lecture hall many years ago, as well as for her unwavering support and encouragement, without which this thesis would most certainly have a different title and topic.

I would also like to thank my parents for having my back and keeping the faith throughout the years – your unconditional love and support made this possible.

Thanks goes to my friends across the world for cheering me on all the way to the finishing line and beyond, and to Kathi, who has now been the Vince to my Howard for roughly three quarters of our lives.

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At the beginning of this thesis there is a red curtain in front of which I stand to tell you what is in store for you, and to invite you to join me on a journey through story and discourse.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 “Hi. Welcome to the show.”

When the comedy act *The Mighty Boosh* won the Perrier Award for Best Newcomer at the Fringe Festival 1998 in Edinburgh, their style was both old-fashioned and entirely outlandish at once compared to the primarily observational comedy popular at the time. When the third series of *The Mighty Boosh* television series aired on BBC2 in 2006, people had slowly started to catch up and begun to understand what the creators Julian Barratt and Noel Fielding might be about with their psychedelic comedy universe, the world of *The Mighty Boosh*, in which the grim reaper drives a taxi and speaks with a cockney accent, a green, hitch-hiking mass-murderer traps people in a box and “Cheese is a kind of meat” (as character Tommy Nookah will be quick to confirm).

Of the broad range of elements the show has to offer – magical, fantastical, musical, scary and funny – one thing in particular stands out: the show is strikingly metareferential throughout, constantly drawing attention towards itself or its medium. Amidst its emphasis on stories and narratives, on magic and fairy tale-like wonder and imagination, there is always an element of self-consciousness that points towards the show’s status as an artefact and the context in which it is embedded in terms of mediality. As thrilling and hilarious as the adventures of the characters might be, the fourth wall is repeatedly knocked down, to a point where one could say it is never even fully established. What is fascinating to observe, however, is the fact that *The Mighty Boosh*’s high degree of illusion-breaking metareferentiality has not alienated its audience – on the contrary. *The Mighty Boosh* enjoys a vast popularity with audiences of all ages that has only been growing over the years. *The Mighty Boosh* is mighty fascinating.

It is this fascination and intriguing metareferential nature that this paper started out to investigate – how does metareference in *The Mighty Boosh* work and what does it achieve? What shapes do meta-elements take, what patterns do

they form and how can they function to keep an audience entertained? What persuades the audience to keep watching instead of declaring the show 'too weird' and giving up? In light of what has recently been officially termed 'the metareferential turn' (cf. Wolf, 2011:1), the question poses itself whether the popularity of a metareferential show like *The Mighty Boosh* could be an indicator or example of a wider phenomenon in the media: have television audiences become meta-tolerant? Or perhaps more competent? Or is it a sign that the media are running themselves dry and entirely heteroreferential television can no longer be successful, or satisfying? Has television reached what John Barth so aptly termed a state of exhaustion (cf. Wolf 2011:30-31)?

All these questions were the starting point of this thesis and were put to the test on a wild and twisted ride through the complex structures governing the first series of *The Mighty Boosh* (aired 2004) and the ever-present question of "how" and "why". How does *The Mighty Boosh* work and to which end does it employ the strategies and devices it uses? What emerges over the course of this analytical quest is an intricate, multi-layered web of meta-elements pervading the series in a variety of forms and shapes – and with an equal multitude of functions. As will be shown below, *The Mighty Boosh* does not pursue any specific agenda with regard to the 'type' of metareferential elements it employs, but uses metareference for the sake of it, to celebrate itself as well as its medium and the collective of texts contained by it.

What becomes also apparent, however, is that this celebration does not result in exhaustion – while meta-competence or -tolerance in the population might well be applicable explanations for the show's popular status, Barth's notion proves altogether insufficient. Rather than reach a state of depletion, the show appears to re-infuse its objects of metareference with new magic and appeal. Beyond providing a source of new originality based on meta-awareness, the show returns a sense of freshness to the old sources that are so blatantly laid bare. And this revival does not stop at *The Mighty Boosh* – the show's often trans- and intermedial character and the vast range of different metareferential elements additionally serve to revitalise not only one genre or medium, but a variety of media. At the end of the journey, an array of old, well-known and well-

used conventions and traditions glow with a new shine, through *The Mighty Boosh*'s use of metareference as an integral part of the show itself.

The Mighty Boosh is more than just another television programme that employs meta-elements. What will now follow below is a re-tracing of the steps leading from the journey's starting point to this conclusion. Starting from an impression of the way *The Mighty Boosh* fits into a wider context of television, as well as research in the field of meta-studies, I will set out to provide an overview of the broad range of metareferential elements and aspects that can be detected in the show. From this rich offer of elements we will then be able to draw a number of conclusions, providing not only a variety of explanations for the series' popularity, but also offering on that aim to show how *The Mighty Boosh* uses metareference to achieve a perhaps long-lost appreciation of form in the watching audience.

Enjoy the show.

1.2 What is *The Mighty Boosh*?

"It's a love affair." – Noel Fielding

"It's kind of... furry." –Rich Fulcher

"There is no reason for the Boosh; it just is." –Nigel Coan

"We don't know what it is." –Julian Barratt

"What was the question again?" – Noel Fielding

(History of the Boosh, 2005)

First formed towards the end of the 1990s by the then independent stand-up comedians Julian Barratt and Noel Fielding, the joint comedy act *The Mighty Boosh* has since not only acquired new members – Rich Fulcher, Mike Fielding and Dave Brown – but has also taken a variety of shapes in terms of content and medium. Starting out as a live stage act that won the Perrier award at the Edinburgh Fringe festival in 1998, *The Mighty Boosh* was later made into a radio play (2000-2001) and subsequent television series currently sporting 3 seasons (2004-2007). *The Mighty Boosh* members have performed live on tour (2006, 2008-09), published a book (2008), organised a festival, released an iPhone application (2010) and there is talk of an upcoming music album and film. Within the first decade of the 21st century, *The Mighty Boosh* developed from a cult to a mainstream phenomenon.

Popular as the show may be, however, what exactly it *is* has not been agreed on. The show appears to escape successful description; something that has been remarked on throughout the years in most interviews with the comedy duo Barratt and Fielding, who are the show's creative centre. Attempts to categorise *The Mighty Boosh* seem to inevitably lead to circumscriptions involving the terms fantastical, magical and surreal (*Charlotte Church, 2007*). Comparisons with other shows or films like *Mr. Benn*, *Sindbad*, *The Goodies* or *The Wizard of Oz* (*Culture Show, 2007*) have been made, but are always inevitably amended in some way or other. Julian Barratt and Noel Fielding themselves have described their show as a 'psychedelic trip-com' (*Chatty Man, 2009*) or some kind of adult fairy tale, but stress that their basic ideas are not new as such, merely updated and modernised (*Nouse, 2006*). They have described the show

as naïve, magical and escapist (*Liverpool*, 2008), but are reluctant to accept the term 'surreal' as a fitting attribute, claiming that the show retains basic principles of logic throughout and is not actually surreal in nature, as fantastical as it might be. The rules that govern the *Boosh*-universe might be unconventional, but they are rules regardless and not at all as illogical as people might initially suppose (*Nouse* 2006, *AV Club*, 2007).

"There's a double act at the heart of it" is another frequently repeated phrase in interviews (*Charlotte Church*, 2007), a double act combined with weekly adventures that start from a simple place and take the protagonists on strange journeys and to strange places before returning them to their home (which, in the case of the first series, is a zoo called the Zooniverse). The adventures change from episode to episode and the setting changes from series to series, but the essence of the show are the characters. The characters, exaggerated as they may be, remain consistent at all times and their dynamics carry the show's seemingly chaotic storylines.

The main characters, Vince Noir (played by Fielding) and Howard Moon (played by Barratt) are, as their creators say, roughly 10% exaggeration of their own personalities and represent polar opposites of attitude (*Inside the Zooniverse*, 2005, *Liverpool*, 2008). Howard Moon, insightful and tortured intellectual and dedicated jazz-appreciator, contrasts sharply with Vince Noir's colourful, naïve excitement for all things superficial, glamorous and fashionable. As cohabitating zoo keepers and friends they are joined by the shaman Naboo 'The Enigma' (Mike Fielding), the zoo manager Bob Fossil (Rich Fulcher), "bordering on retarded" and "preferably dancing" (*Zooniverse*, 2005) and the gorilla Bollo (Dave Brown). They are occasionally joined by Dixon Bainbridge, the zoo owner and explorer (Matt Berry) who functions as rival and antagonist for Howard Moon. In addition, every adventure features outlandish creatures of fantasy like the Hitcher, Black Frost, Mr Susan or the bubble-gum character Charlie.

Influences for their hilarious and magical universe are manifold, but not, as Barratt and Fielding claim, primarily taken from comedy. They acknowledge childhood influences like *Monty Python*, *The Goodies*, *Sindbad* or *Mr. Benn*, but

in creating the world of *The Mighty Boosh*, they insist that inspiration is taken mostly from genres and media other than comedy (IFC, 2009). Fielding, educated at Croydon Art College and responsible for the look of the show, counts Kipling's *The Jungle Book* as a main source of inspiration, just like the paintings of Dalí, Magritte and Rousseau (*Culture Show*, 2007). Different musical genres play an important role for both. Barratt, primarily in charge of the music in the series and a jazz musician himself, takes inspiration from prog, jazz-fusion and other musical styles, depending on the character the music is for (*AV Club*, 2009). They have explicitly and repeatedly stated their interest in narratives and stories (*Culture Show*, 2007) rather than just being "weird for the sake of being weird" (Nouse 2006). Both also agree that in order to stay original in comedy, inspiration must come from other fields of interest rather than other comedy acts and therefore created *The Mighty Boosh* in isolation from other comedians' influences. As an initial result, the first TV season of *The Mighty Boosh* was commissioned simply because, as Mark Freeland, commissioning executive for BBC Comedy states, "there was nothing like it" on TV (*History of the Boosh*, 2005).

When the show first aired on Channel 4 in 2004, it filled a market gap, attracting an audience of children as well as adults, with a special popularity enjoyed by, as Barratt and Fielding state, pensioners, who appreciate the music hall feeling of the show, and sailors (*Scotsman*, 2005). Children seem to be able to enjoy the show for its magical properties and fantasy, finding joy in the adventure aspects without being taken aback by its more bizarre shapes or questioning them. Some other viewers, as Fielding remarks, initially felt like they were being 'cheated' into watching the show.

"A lot of people sort of thought 'this isn't funny' but couldn't take their eyes off of it. They wanted to make sure it wasn't funny. [...] They felt a little bit tricked, something like 'oh, I laughed at that, that's not on, why am I laughing? [...] I shouldn't be [...] laughing at this!'" (*Chatty Man*, 2009)

Across the board, *The Mighty Boosh* appears to engage audiences of all ages on various levels and for various reasons. Children and adults alike manage to find different forms of meaning in the show's indescribable multitude of images

and engage with it in their own way. This phenomenon is not dissimilar to what Butler and Sepp (2007) have observed with regards to Mat Groenning's cartoon series *The Simpsons*, explaining the series' paramount popularity with the multitude of levels of meaning the series is compiled of.

Encouraging the audience to find their own meaning in a sea of signs also constituted a major decision in the development of the TV-series from its preceding stage show (*History of the Boosh*, 2005). The change of medium and resulting change of spectator experience, shifting from a large crowd at a live show to a comparatively small or singular viewing experience in front of the TV, brought with it an increase of ambiguity in the series: while the pilot episode was filmed in front of a live audience to convey an atmosphere of collective experience, this element was discarded for the filming of the first season for being counterproductive. The team realised, as Mark Freeland says, that superimposing the laughter of a live crowd onto the show kept the television audience from finding their own meaning and own humorous aspects in the show (*History of the Boosh*, 2005).

The illusion of a live stage experience was shifted from simulated presence of audience to the look of the series itself, exchanging comparatively realistic CGI effects with what director Paul King calls a "more theatrical" look (*Zooniverse*, 2005). Inspired by the live performances, themselves according to Fielding "highly unprofessional" and involving sparse, self-made and ridiculous costumes out of cardboard and gaffer tape, the television version of *The Mighty Boosh* set out to purposely look as if it had been shot in a studio (*Zooniverse*, 2005). As Fielding puts it, "We like deadpan sort of masks, and deadpan sort of creatures. For some reason, it's quite important." (*AV Club*, 2009). He also mentions Rousseau's paintings in this context, and the fact that "the idea of the jungle is more powerful than the actual jungle" (*Culture Show*, 2007), and that this anti-realist sentiment is kept in mind in the creation of *The Mighty Boosh*. As director Paul King puts it, "instead of going to a forest, we brought the forest into the studio" (*Zooniverse*, 2005). The costumes, still designed by Fielding, but produced by a professional team, look more convincing than their live show predecessors, but nevertheless retain a 'raggedy' look and must never be 'too

real' or 'too nice'. The entire look of the series is built around the credo that the set and costumes should look as if they were 'made' and performed rather than natural. Explaining how a snake costume was created out of a coat hanger and a cheap pair of tights, make-up artist Christine Cant sums it up with "keeping it simple seemed to work better than something fancy" (*Zooniverse*, 2005).

The effect created by *The Mighty Boosh's* unique look is not only visually engaging, but also represents a constant factor of metareferentiality throughout the series, as will be discussed in further detail below. The world of *The Mighty Boosh* looks 'made', it openly reveals its constructedness and performativity by displaying the frayed edges of its costumes and the cardboard character of its sets. While this do-it-yourself approach gives the show a humorous and charming touch of naivety and innocence, on another level it also continuously foregrounds the artificiality and fictionality of the universe it is set in. As convinced as the characters might be of their 'reality', the viewer will always be able to see the show for what it is – a construct. Implications drawn from this form of self-reference will of course vary from viewer to viewer – children might be persuaded to ignore it for the sake of the story, some adults will consider it a silly source for humour or appreciate it for its unconventionality, while yet others might be persuaded to regard it from a more critical perspective.

Both Barratt and Fielding have explicitly stated their intention to create something overtly fictional and fantastical rather than adopt a more realistic approach to comedy, as e.g. the popular comedy show *The Office* (*Liverpool*, 2008). In a way, they declare, *The Mighty Boosh* is an escapist reaction to the amount of everyday realism encountered on television that involves average people going about their everyday business. *The Mighty Boosh*, on the other hand, was intended to offer something entirely removed from everyday normality and instead provide a way of escaping into a world of magic and fantasy (*Scotsman*, 2005).

This general formula seems to have worked well enough, considering the popularity the show has gained with such a broad audience. The specific details of this seemingly simple concept of 'adult fairy tale', however, are more complex

than might be expected. What is striking about the show is not only its unusual concept and its deviation from the majority of other shows encountered on television, but also a surprising tendency towards metareference. The show, in all its colourful and fantastical absurdities, continues to humorously lay itself bare as an artefact and causes meta-awareness in the audience in a variety of forms. The nature and function of these forms – that have mostly escaped attention in interviews – are to be the main point of the analysis below. Before this can be done, however, a number of remarks concerning the concept of metareference are in order to set a more concise frame or approach to the data in question.

II. THEORY

2.1 Outline and terminology

The following section has three main aims. For one, to contextualise *The Mighty Boosh* by roughly outlining the wider field of meta-studies and aspects of its historical dimension and development. For two, to address a number of implications and current points of discussion with regards to metaization that will be important when functionalising the findings of section III below. For three, to address a number of characteristics of *The Mighty Boosh* that need to be taken into account when analysing its meta-elements. What needs to be stressed at this point also is that neither the outline of historical context nor the number of 'relevant' studies mentioned are by any means holistic accounts of research carried out in the field, but selected cornerstones to provide a basic, main frame within which *The Mighty Boosh* will be examined in detail. The focus will naturally be on studies and articles dealing with particular forms or aspects of metaization that are related or similar to those that can be found in *The Mighty Boosh*.

Another necessary initial point to make, perhaps as a transition into the field of meta-studies, is that of terminology, which will come as no surprise to most. As has been mentioned repeatedly in both numerous individual contributions and more comprehensive publications of collections of articles (Hauthal et al. 2007, Nöth & Bishara 2007, etc.), the broad field of meta-studies across the media can boast an equally broad spectrum of terms describing various phenomena that could maybe be subsumed under the vague umbrella term 'self-reference'. The media-independent nature of meta-phenomena has resulted in a number of disciplines adopting a broad range of individual approaches to the matter, coining terms and adapting definitions as needed for the specific purpose at hand. This, in turn, has resulted in an often overwhelming multitude of seemingly identical terms that are sometimes used interchangeably, sometimes with distinction and often with an individual meaning in a particular context or study. Terms frequently encountered and cited are, among others, 'self-

reference', 'self-reflection', 'self-consciousness', 'self-reflexivity', 'self-referentiality', 'auto-reflexivity' and 'metareference' (cf. Hauthal et al. 2007:1; Wolf, 2009:15). Not only does it make navigating through scholarly literature more laborious, it also necessitates a precise definition of the meaning of terms used, and equally careful attention to the varying denotations of terminologies of individual studies when attempting a comparison or synthesis of a range of different sources.

The need for a *unified* terminology and methodology has also been addressed in more than one instance. With the emergence of a field of 'meta-studies' over the last years, comprehensive publications like e.g. Nöth (2007), Hauthal et al. (2007) and most recently Wolf (2009) have remarked on the issue and attempted to offer solutions and provide clearly defined terminologies and models for the analysis of metareferential phenomena, to facilitate communication not only within disciplines, but, in Wolf's case, across disciplines, from a transmedial perspective. It is this latter, transmedial definition that will be used in this paper, as it appears to find widespread approval and, more importantly, retains a simplicity that allows for relatively uncomplicated application. Set apart from self-reference and self-reflection (for a definition cf. Wolf, 2009:30), metareference is thus defined as

a special, transmedial form of usually non-accidental self-reference produced by signs or sign configurations which are (felt to be) located on a logically higher level, a 'meta-level', within an artifact or performance; this self-reference, which can extend from this artifact to the entire system of the media, forms or implies a statement about an object-level, namely on (aspects of) the medium/system referred to. Where metareference is properly understood, an at least minimal corresponding 'meta-awareness' is elicited in the recipient, who thus becomes conscious of both the medial (or 'fictional' in the sense of artificial and, sometimes in addition, 'invented') status of the work under discussion and the fact that media-related phenomena are at issue, rather than (hetero-)references to the world outside the media. (Wolf, 2009:31, italics in the original)

The terms 'metareference' and 'meta-elements', as investigated in this paper, denote thus instances that activate a cognitive frame in the recipient's mind that triggers media-awareness, in which the attention is drawn to the artefact and its mediality or representationality rather than hetero-referential content (Wolf,

2009:28). In contrast to mere self-reflection, the existence of a meta-level is thereby of crucial importance.

2.2 Developments of metareferential film and television - a brief overview

Such and similar instances of metareference can be found across the media already long before the advent of postmodernism, with which the phenomenon of metaization was initially primarily associated. Popular examples from the field of literature are novels like *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quixote*, that introduced metareference to the genre of the novel already at its most early developmental stages, or early meta-drama like *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. Instances of metaization have been observed in the genre throughout periods following. Other traditional art genres like drama, poetry, sculpture, painting or music have been investigated for their metareferential potential and have yielded results (see Wolf, 2009:4-6 for an overview, see studies of the same volume as illustration). The same holds true for newer media like radio, photography, film, television and, more recently, computer games and domains related to cyberspace, as can be gathered from looking at the contents of the volume *Metareference Across the Media* (2009) alone. Since this paper's main focus is a television series, however, I will place emphasis on primarily filmic developments metareference (and relevant self-reference in a broader sense) in the following historical outline that will help to set a rough context for *The Mighty Boosh*.

Like in other arts, instances of self-reference, self-reflection and metareference in the audiovisual media are not in themselves anything new and have been observed in various forms and varying degrees and effects ever since the beginnings of film and television. Russian structuralist artists introduced meta-elements to film as early as the first two decades of the twentieth century, as Greber elaborates on at the example of Vladimir Mayakovski (2009). Mayakovski, who employed metareferential devices not only in film, but also his plays, paintings and as a means of stylizing himself as a public persona,

acknowledged the artistic value of cinematography and was among the first to demand appreciation for the medium's potential (Greber 2009:624). His film *Zakovannaya Fil'moy* features the first instance of filmic metalepsis recorded and lays bare the cinematographic device in a number of instances (625-629). As an important (if historiographically neglected) and as far as his metafilms go highly political filmmaker, he contributed to early avant-garde cinema as it developed in Western society (630) and at the same time, demonstrated the transgeneric potential of metareference in general.

The same fascination with the new medium of cinematography also occupied German avant-garde cinema of the 1920s and 1930s, in which the possibilities and limitations of the camera screen were investigated and experimented with. Aesthetic illusion was frequently torn by means of metareference, the narration or the apparatus was made visible, while the content of the film took secondary importance (cf. Kabatek 8-10). Early self- and metareferential films of this kind, termed 'expressionistic films', exposed their 'madness' to the audience, set themselves apart from mass-produced cinema and explored the medium's potential as an art form, its possibilities as well as limitations (Kabatek, 11, 13f.).

Apart from featuring the theme of filmmaking on the story level, early 'metafilm' was simultaneously concerned with the technicalities of film production and representation of reality on the screen. By foregrounding the formal composition of images, such early films thematised the issue of referentiality within the medium and the process of decoding by the audience – an audience that, in the 1920s or 30s, cannot be expected to be as 'media-savvy' as, for example, an audience of the 1990s, mere 50 years later (Kabatek, 17-19). Experimenting with the medium's possibilities and laying them bare in some way or other, at that early point of the medium's development, can be considered to have contributed to the *forming* of conventions and their shared understanding as much as to their partial subversion. In such early days, metareference and self-revelation therefore takes part in shaping the discourse surrounding the filmic medium, the production and processing of images – overt exploration and development of the new medium went hand in hand with developing of media awareness and skills in the audience.

This theme of experimentalism and didacticism is also evident in self- and meta-referential film and television formats of the following decades of the twentieth century. Avant-garde film, or genres like e.g. music clips continued to explore the technical possibilities and boundaries of the medium and its perception (cf. Scherer, 2000). French films of the 1960s used metareferential strategies to critically address issues of creativity and identity (Pfeifer, 419), while self-reflexive television programmes like the German *Glashaus* made the television industry itself its object of investigation, revealing its components and the principles according to which it works as a medium of mass communication and instrument of power. Self-reflection (albeit not metareferential) was, in this case, used to make a relatively inexperienced audience aware of the influence of television on society and sought to make transparent the individual factors operating behind the scenes.

As has been widely acknowledged and pointed out, it was the 1980s and 1990s that constituted a turn in the media landscape with regard to self-reference, registering not only an increase in metaization, but, most significantly, an apparent 'branching out' of meta-techniques into the mainstream entertainment industry (Gymnich, 2007:127-128). Taking on more playful and humorous shapes than before, metaization could be observed more and more often outside the avant-garde film in popular cinema and television, entertaining a much broader spectre of audiences, like e.g. 'meta-science fiction' movies like *Spaceballs* (1987) and, later *Galaxy Quest* (1999) (Gymnich, 2007:128). This phenomenon also extends beyond merely self-reflexive 'movies about movie-making' that have as their subject the lives of actors and filmmakers in Hollywood, but, in fact, movies that depart from a merely self-referential or self-reflexive format to shift towards 'proper metareference'. They reference genre conventions, as for example the movie *Pleasantville* (1998) or the *Truman Show* (1998) (Gymnich, 2007:134). That a movie's commercial popularity did everything but suffer from metaization is evident, since, as Rajewski remarks, the movie *Pulp Fiction* (1994) reached cult status, primarily due to its metareferential character (2011:416-417), which set it apart from any similar movie of the time. Rather than alienating an audience by potentially attacking

aesthetic illusion, the function of metaization becomes to add a 'special something'.

The same phenomenon applies to television, despite the medium's traditionally assumed simplicity and conservatism (Gymnich, 2007:128-129). Throughout the 1990s, mainstream television programmes can be observed to frequently employ metareferential elements and in some instances the series in question, too, have attained cult status. Common examples are Matt Groening's cartoon *The Simpsons* (1989-), a series that continues to be of academic interest (cf. Butler & Sepp), David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990-1992), or the mystery series *The X-Files* (1993-2002). Throughout the 1990s the occasional metareference sneaks into a multitude of television series of various genres, as for example *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Melrose Place* (1992-1999), *Friends* (1994-2004), *Charmed* (1998-2006) (cf. Gymnich, 2007) or sitcoms like *The Nanny* (1993-1999).

By revealing, for example, the complex interplay between audio and video channels through a brief collapsing of a conventionalised cooperation between the two, or laying bare a particular characteristic formal convention by putting a twist on it, or even singular instances of metalepsis, television series reveal a much more complex structural setup than might be expected (Gymnich, 2007:130-135). While the effect of those metareferences *can* certainly be to encourage a more critical view of the television medium, or raise awareness of a 'serious' issue of mediality (using the word serious in a broad sense), in many cases, as Gymnich points out in her essay, the most prominent effect is *humour* (Gymnich, 2007:150). A momentary collapse of aesthetic illusion is used to create laughter and surprise without irreversibly damaging the illusory fabric of the series as a whole (131).

What is interesting to derive from the above outline is that the function and effect of metareference in audiovisual media appears to have undergone changes over the years: If self- and metareference initially served to establish cinematography as a form of art or to show its complexity as a medium, it did not restrict itself to this function – beyond the experimentation with and

exploration of the medium's possibilities or the mapping and pushing of its technical boundaries, it also served to educate and alert its audience to its own forms and components. The emerging media-skills in the audience could then be used as a basis to critically treat issues of representation and mediality (albeit this remained limited to a fairly elitist circle of the avant-garde, in which an audience was expected to possess a certain level of skill and willingness to intellectually engage with the artefact in question). However, at some point during the last decades of the twentieth century, metareference can be observed to extend its scope beyond the avant-garde to slowly creep into the mainstream, this time unfolding a potential of relatively uncritical (yet not unsophisticated) humour and entertainment and a more widespread and increasing popularity.

While techniques of metaization are by no means extinct in arthouse productions, or have lost the possibility of assuming a distinctly serious and critical form, they seem not at all restricted to either any longer, but occur widely in all aspects of media production, re-shaping the media landscape at large. This phenomenon has predictably not escaped academic attention; scholars have (more or less sceptically) hinted at what has recently been neutrally termed the "metareferential turn" (cf. Wolf, 2011:4-5) with varying degree of optimism and enthusiasm. That this metareferential turn should be regarded as a given tendency that is observable in all forms of contemporary art and media to some extent has been argued by Wolf in the same volume (cf. 7f.) along with the necessity to investigate its dimensions and explain the motivation behind these recent developments. Acknowledging a certain shift in scholarly perspective and perceptive sensitivity towards meta-elements and its consequences for the amount of research carried out in this field, the metareferential turn is, as Wolf argues, not merely the product of a change of academic attention. A disproportionate increase of metaization as a discernible change in the objects of investigation themselves justifies discussion of the phenomenon in its own right (7).

2.3 The 'metareferential turn'

Explanations for and implications of such a widespread development in contemporary arts and media vary, but have very recently been summed up by Wolf in three main arguments. For one, the metareferential turn can be considered as a "general, long-term and in part evolutionary" development of the media, which considers an ever growing tendency towards meta-reflection an inherently human trait that can be regarded a "cultural luxury" at a point where the human being can afford to shift focus away from the fulfilling of needs and urges of survival (cf. Wolf 2011:25-26). A possible maturing of humankind and the media, as well as a blurring of boundaries between reality and media (as the media grow to become an ever bigger part of everyday life) are points of discussion connected to this explanation, as well as the argument that society has developed a familiarity with metareference and, through increasing media-competence, attained something that could be called 'meta-tolerance', which in turn allows for metareference to be used as a 'harmless' device of entertainment (28-29).

A different, less optimistic "short-term, symptom-based" explanation, "where metaization appears as a passive by-product or index of recent developments" (Wolf, 2011:29) views the increase of metaization as a result of a postmodern crisis of reality that harbours mistrust for heteroreferential representation (30). Increasing metaization is considered the consequence of the arts' struggle to liberate themselves from external determinations - to a state of "exhaustion", as Barth put it, where they become socially pointless and void and lose touch with society (30). Metareference, in this context, poses the only remaining chance for originality, if not necessarily in any media, then at least for the avant-garde (31). Wolf remarks, however, that such a pessimistic approach is not imperative – equally could the changes be interpreted as a new source of creativity, exploiting an unprecedented level of interpretive skill on part of the recipients (31).

The third, less bleak explanation of increased metaization as a "short-term reaction to recent developments" (Wolf, 2011:32) takes on the view that the

development is an active reaction of texts to a changed media landscape, to tendencies of hybridization, to competition for the audience's attention, to the need for self-advertisement (32-34). Metaization is thus often regarded as a prestige element to be employed in the battle for success and recognition next to 'traditionally acknowledged' arts and art forms (35). Reminiscent of Mayakovsky's aim to reveal the new medium of cinematography as a form of art, it could be argued that the employing of meta-elements is to be seen as the mainstream's claim for quality.

To decide from which of the above three perspective *The Mighty Boosh* is to be viewed, however, is neither the aim, nor the point of this chapter – this will become relevant at a later point. Rather than restrict the upcoming analysis' approach to the series, the above outline primarily serves to raise a number of important, preliminary points to keep in mind, and to put the findings below and their following discussion into some perspective. Mainly, this chapter has shown that metaization of film and television is not new as such, but has recently increased in number, branched out into the sphere of popular entertainment and has throughout the years taken on a variety of forms serving a range of functions. This is in agreement with a transmedially observable phenomenon recently termed the 'metareferential turn' for which scholars have given explanations that range from declarations of a state of cultural exhaustion to more positive attitudes celebrating a new level of sophistication in both production and reception of arts and media. With this in mind, the next logical step considering this paper's agenda is to try and place *The Mighty Boosh* into this wider context before looking at singular instances of metaization that can be found in the series in section 3 and exploring possible functions and implications in section 4.

3.4 *The Mighty Boosh* as a metatext

When trying to contextualise *The Mighty Boosh* with regards to a metareferential tradition of television and film, a number of aspects need to be kept in mind. It is tempting to conclude that because it is a comedy television show, it should not be surprising or particularly striking to find *The Mighty Boosh* make use of meta-elements to create the occasional gag. As has been mentioned above, a number of TV series have been observed to show such a tendency to popular effect, and it might seem straightforward to trace the cult status of the first series of *The Mighty Boosh* back the same way as, perhaps, that of *The Simpsons* or *Pulp Fiction*. From this perspective, the series seems to be easily put in line with a number of other television series that display tendencies for metaization to humorous effect. However, as could be inferred from the brief introduction of the series above, *The Mighty Boosh* turns out to be somewhat more complex in certain regards.

First of all, *The Mighty Boosh* has proven to be fairly label- and genre-defying. A psychedelic comedy show with a double act at its heart is as specific as description gets, unlike with series like *The X-Files*, *Ally McBeal* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, all of which are at least roughly categorisable as 'mystery' or 'dramedy'. While *The Mighty Boosh* does work according to an underlying structural principle of presenting a different adventure every episode, the individual episodes cover a range of different genres (albeit in a parodying manner) and it is hard, if not impossible, to relate the series as a whole to one specific label and prefix it with the term 'meta' as has been done in the case of 'meta-horror', 'meta-science fiction', etc. The term 'meta-comedy' is equally unfitting, since close examination will show that while the show is undeniably humorous, the object of meta-reflection is not comedy itself. The show is not member of any particular subgenre of television that it reflects on in a metareferential way, but covers a range of elements that can be found across the media landscape.

A second important fact that needs pointing out is the sheer amount of meta-elements in *The Mighty Boosh* that is nowhere near the occasional, surprising

meta-gag that Gymnich observes in television series (cf. 131). If metaization in television series is automatically subjected to limitations in consideration of the audience's taste and patience (cf. 131), it seems deviant at least to encounter a series with an abundance of meta-elements that does not seem to care at all for its audience's willingness to be confronted with an undermining of conventions. Additionally, *The Mighty Boosh* does not wait for its audience to become familiar with the show before meta-elements in form of little inside jokes are implemented, something that has been observed in series like *The X-Files* or *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (Gymnich 133). On the contrary, *The Mighty Boosh* displays a high degree of metaization from the very beginning as part of the show's typical characteristics.

The third and most important consideration for the analysis of the series is its inherently intermedial nature. As has been mentioned already, *The Mighty Boosh* takes influences not only from various genres of film, but in fact, various genres of media and arts, like painting, music and literature. In many instances those influences have been noted for their metareferential nature themselves, as e.g. the paintings of Magritte, explicitly mentioned by Fielding as one of his main influences, have been discussed in the context of meta-studies (cf. Wolf 2009:48-49). This large spectrum of sources results in a multitude of intertextual and intermedial elements that can be found in the series, as well as a diverse variety of meta-elements. Additionally, it must be kept in mind that the show itself is a development from a prior live stage show and radio show, which has been remarked to have left traces on its television successor (*Jonathan Ross*, 2006). In many ways it can be considered meta-medial, often making not only statements about its own medium of television, but about other media as well (Wolf, 2004, qtd. in Oesterle 258). It becomes thus problematic to approach the series from an exclusively monomedial angle, which, in turn brings us to the following, final point of this section before plunging into the analysis of individual meta-elements – the question of how to approach them systematically.

3.5 An intermedial approach - remarks

Considering the numerous references to the series' intermedial aspect and already preceding explanation as to this paper's use and definition of terminology based on an intermedial approach to metareference, it will come as little surprise now that the main, initial framework for analysis that I used to approach the show was also based on Werner Wolf's model as proposed in his introductory essay to *Metareference Across the Media* (2009). As was the case with the issue of settling for a particular definition of metareference, it is again the simplicity of Wolf's proposed criteria that speaks in their favour as they allow analysis of meta-elements according to medium-independent functions, which, in the case of *The Mighty Boosh*, means that elements can be analysed according to the same parameters regardless of whether they are elements traditionally typical of television, drama, or any other medium. At the same time the model provides a systematic way of categorizing individual meta-elements according to basic criteria of scope, semantic discernibility, content and frequent functions (cf. Wolf, 2009:37-38).

The main oppositions in this regard are *intracompositional* and *extracompositional* forms of metareference that can take *explicit* or *implicit* shape and address a text's *mediality (fictio)* or *truth/fiction value (fictum)*. In terms of the nature of their function, meta-elements can be of a *critical* or *non-critical* nature (cf. 37-38). This framework makes it possible to examine instances of metareference systematically and largely unproblematically – in theory. However, it must also be said from the beginning that such a clean, systematic application of Wolf's criteria is, on second glance, very much denied by the very nature of the meta-elements themselves.

The main difficulty to be faced – and perhaps solved, too – is, again, that of the *amount* of data at hand. The first series of *The Mighty Boosh* offers numerous meta-elements of all forms and sizes, which necessitates the superimposing of additional, broad criteria in order to further structure the analysis into a more linear and more easily processible form. While single elements may still be examined according to Wolf's four essential criteria above, the mass of meta-

elements and –phenomena needs further subdivision into broader categories in order to be discussed with logical coherence. This can be done by implementing two further main criteria as proposed by Rajewski: that of ‘form-based’ and ‘content-based’ metareference (cf. 2009:137) or, roughly put, meta-elements situated on the story level and meta-elements situated on the discourse level. From a transmedial perspective, this distinction has been subject to some debate because of its limitations; however, in this case, it will be implemented for practical reasons.

To clarify, it must be said that the main aim of this distinction is that of facilitating a systematic approach to the matter and presenting the analysis in a more feasible, linear way instead of diving into chaos. By introducing additional frames of reference, content- and form-based strategies, foci can more easily be placed and elements more easily grouped. In this vein, the analysis will first focus on certain form-related issues like that of ontology and the structure of the series including e.g. ontological metalepses as transgressions between ‘postulated worlds’ within the text (cf. Wolf 2009:50). Such discussion of the structure is not only illuminating in its own right, but also important for the understanding of the afterwards following content-based meta-aspects. Finally, another group of ‘form-based’ meta-elements – those specific to the medium of television – will round off the analysis.

Something that will become apparent in the process of the analysis is that in many cases it will be difficult to draw a clean line between elements and their individual functions, or in fact, their belonging to a form- rather than content-based (or vice versa) category. In many instances *The Mighty Boosh* shows a high degree of complexity in the workings of its meta-elements that makes clean separation difficult, if not impossible. It should therefore be pointed out that a division of form and content, discourse and story level is not implemented to establish impermeable boundaries, but to give a more useful and productive ‘shape’ to the process of analysis first and foremost. This does not mean that there will not be need for occasional leeway when it comes to the categorisation or description of elements – the aim is to describe rather than prescribe. With this in mind, let us move on.

III. ANALYSIS

3.1 Textual worlds and borders

The first thing that needs to be discussed when it comes to analysing *The Mighty Boosh* with regard to its metareferential potential is the show's structural setup and its various ontological components, as they contribute to the understanding the various forms of metareference that can be detected in the show. Apart from possessing some general 'typical' features like the inherently 'made' look that was already mentioned when introducing the show, the episodes of the first series are all structured in a specific, rather unconventional way that becomes relevant again and again the process of examining and explaining other forms of metareference detectable in the text: the episodes feature an overt level, or 'frame', of narration. It is this phenomenon that will now be examined more closely.

First an examination of the formal shape of this 'frame' is in order: At the beginning of each episode, the main characters Howard Moon and Vince Noir (not Julian Barratt and Noel Fielding!) appear before a red curtain, introduce themselves and address the audience directly, talking about the contents of the respective episode, specific formal aspects of the show, or even matters like the act of acting itself. In the course of this introductory dialogue they tend to become side-tracked by triviality or get caught up in some kind of disagreement. They eventually leave the 'stage' with the words "Enjoy the show!" and the curtain parts to reveal an animated introduction screen. The voice-over "Come with us now on a journey through time and space – to the world of the Mighty Boosh" accompanies a zoom into the animated world. Strange creatures and symbols (some of which reappear saliently throughout the episodes as props or parts of costumes or decoration) accompany the intro song and the animated writing "*The Mighty Boosh, created by Julian Barratt and Noel Fielding*" is shown. The animated sequence then transits into the show proper and we see the world of the characters, the Zooniverse, where the action takes place. In some, but not all, cases the show ends with the curtain closing upon the scene

and Howard and Vince reappearing as 'narrators' to provide additional commentary before the credits begin to roll.

From the above description it is easily concluded that the show consists of two basic textual 'worlds', or ontological levels; that of the narrators in front of the curtain and that of the characters 'inside' the Zooniverse. Before the content level of the Zooniverse can be examined, however, it is necessary to investigate the specific nature and functions of this 'narrator frame' because – as will become apparent and might already have been guessed at – one of its functions, apart from the one of creating humour, is that of metareference. Not only can metareferential elements be detected on the ontologically higher level itself, but often the interplay of the 'frame' and the 'show proper' also serves to create meta-awareness. Before we can go into detail, however, it will be necessary to determine the precise ontological status of those 'frame sequences' in question:

I will refer to these 'curtain-sequences' as 'framing sequences' or 'framings' as defined by Wolf in his article "Frames, Framings and Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media" (2006). In this sense, those framing sequences are textual elements situated at the borders of the text proper (the very beginning and occasionally the end of the text) and fulfil a 'frame-setting' function: located on an ontologically higher level, they provide the audience with clues and guidelines as to the 'correct' reception and interpretation of the work in reference (cf. 6ff.). The framing sequences in front of the curtain instruct the audience and draw attention to particular elements of the episode as well as the show as a whole, in many cases in form of a metamessage (cf. Wolf, 2006:6-7) By doing this, the framings trigger all three cognitive frames Wolf lists: that of 'artwork', that of 'generic conventions' as well as 'fictionality' in an unusual, conspicuous way. (2006:13-14)

To illustrate this considerable mouthful of information, the ontological difference is indicated in every single framing sequence by the presence of the curtain and the sentence "Enjoy the show", spoken by either of the narrators, indicating that what follows is 'contained' within the level of the narrators. There

are, however, additional elements that reinforce this ontological hierarchy more prominently: in the initial framing of the episode “Tundra”, for example, Vince and Howard openly discuss the script of the episode. Vince announces that he will wear the legs of a ram in one scene, to which Howard replies “I cut that bit.” Vince protests “That’s the best bit!” and an argument about the merit of the scene in question ensues. The most important point, however, – that of Howard and Vince before the curtain being situated on an ontologically higher level of the text – is made; the story that follows is explicitly marked as the creation of two already fictional characters, which divides the text into a hierarchically ‘higher’ and a ‘lower’ level. The framings can therefore be described as textual elements that are not part of the ‘text proper’ (i.e. the adventure itself), but superior in knowledge and in control of the content of the show.

It should be mentioned that the specific status of this ontologically higher level as a framing is, of course, debatable. There is the option of postulating the scenes in front of the curtain not as mere framings, or levels of overt narration, but as embedding hypo-narratives. It could be argued that the ‘narrators’ Howard and Vince are themselves part of a narrative, which would, admittedly, be corroborated by instances in which their discussion goes beyond the subject of the episodes proper and extends to what appears to be a shared fictional reality they themselves move in. References to previous points in time of their lives, to their common friend Leroy¹, speculations about their futures, as well as the mentioning of habits they apparently have ‘off screen’ give a certain dimension to the world of the narrators that could be considered an indicator of a sketchy, yet existing ‘frame story’ in which two characters work to stage a performance, rather than being a mere inflated extradiegetic level (cf. Wolf frame stories, 180).

Nevertheless, as far as this paper is concerned, any such implications will have to be disregarded. Apart from it going beyond the scope and purpose of this thesis to provide an ample discussion of this specific matter (as its impact

¹ Leroy, interestingly, is mentioned on the content level as well as the framing level, but never appears in person for certain on either ontological level. The episode “Electro” features a flashback of Vince with a character who can be assumed to be Leroy, but he is in heavy costume and not distinctly recognisable. He remains primarily a recurring plot device and joke.

on the level's metareferential functions is rather insignificant), there are a number of relevant reasons against declaring the curtain level a narrative in its own right and we will therefore be settling for its being an inflated, extradiegetic level. Regardless of the abovementioned narrative elements, the quality of the ontologically higher level's 'story' remains sketchy at best and in terms of narrativity there seems to be very little information to work with. The pieces of information do not fall together to form anything comparable to a coherent story or plotline, but remain scattered and disconnected. Similarly, information given in a preceding episode's framing sequence does not affect any of the following framing sequences and never resurfaces or becomes relevant again. While it serves to create situational comedy and fleshes out the personalities of the narrators, there is little narrative quality to any of the 'content information' given. In contrast, the ontological level's prominent *function* of introducing, discussing and explaining the content level, establishing a connection to the audience and serving as a mediating 'middle' between the content and the recipient speaks strongly for considering the framing sequences as instances of lively narratorial discourse rather than an embedding narrative level².

In their position of narrators, Vince and Howard function as guides to the show as such. They serve as a transition into the text – being no longer real-life people, but fictional characters – and mediate between the audience and the content. In introducing the show, (as e.g. in the episode Bollo: "This week we will be dealing with the tricky subject of death.") they also point out particular aspects of the show and seem to be giving the audience a sense of orientation by directing focus to specific elements. In the episode "Charlie", they introduce a "special guest", the avant-garde theatre director and playwright Simon McFarnaby (himself a fictional character portrayed by actor Simon Farnaby, who then appears in the Zooniverse as the publisher Hamilton Cork). In other instances, the narrators interact with the audience to facilitate reception and put hypothetically unsettled viewers at ease, as in "The Hitcher", where Howard

² Also, considering the apparent similarities between the world of the narrators and the embedded Zooniverse that are implied in this 'fleshing out' of the framing level, one of its functions can also be considered the supporting of mise-en-abymic structures, as discussed in 3.2.2 below.

announces in the framing that he is going to play a range of characters, but that the audience need not worry because his acting skills can handle the challenge.

Not unlike a dramatic prologue, or narratorial introduction by an overt narrator, the framings are therefore overt, authorised (para)textual elements that function as “introductory, explanatory, etc. material that forms a ‘threshold’ to the main text of the work in question” (Wolf, 2005:20) without being part of the represented world (the Zooniverse) as such. They establish the fictional status of the Zooniverse as well as the ontological structure of the series as a whole. Additionally, they forge a connection between the text and the viewer by addressing a fictional audience, therefore not only drawing attention to the text as a construct, but also the communication situation and the recipient as an active part of it. The real life viewer therefore becomes aware of themselves as consciously watching something that is openly fictional and constructed, which, in and of itself can already be considered remarkable of a television entertainment show.

In terms of mediality, the framings are interesting in as much as they are, on the one hand, homomedial in the sense of being filmed with a camera and forming part of the same television programme as the content proper. At the same time, however, they imitate or reference a *dramatic* tradition by featuring the red curtain and an implied stage. As such the framing sequence activates a cognitive frame of ‘stage performance’ rather than that of ‘television broadcast’ and gives the audience a significantly different ‘key’ to understanding the content than would be expected normally. It is as if the textual frame signals “this is to be viewed as a stage show, even if it is broadcast on television.” The simultaneous application of two different approaches to interpreting the show again gives rise to a certain amount of meta-medial awareness in the audience based on contrast between different genres, something that has been remarked upon and discussed in the context of film script and stage drama by Oesterle (2009).

Contrary to the fairly mimetic nature of mainstream television, the framing sequence draws attention towards the dramatic *performativity* of the broadcast

programme, establishes a connection to another medium and, through this deviation from expectation, draws attention to not only its own 'performed' nature, but also the usually concealed 'performedness' of television in general: In the end, all television is performance the same way that drama is, even if television tends to make the viewer forget about it. Addressing two separate cognitive frames pertaining to different media and blurring the boundaries between them equally serves to draw attention to the differences of generic conventions, as well to the common factors figuring in the conventions of both.

3.1.1 The look of *The Mighty Boosh*

Something that has already been mentioned in the section introducing the series, but that should be pointed out again in connection with the issue of mimesis and an emphasis on performativity is the deliberately makeshift look of the series. It has been mentioned that the structural setup of the episodes already openly references the show's constructedness and draws attention to the show being a performance. This impression is supported by the fact that the sceneries encountered inside the Zooniverse – whether they be the zoo itself, the inside of an office, a jungle or the arctic tundra – all look intentionally 'made'. All animals of the zoo or magical creatures that are introduced can be recognised without much trouble as people in (bad) costumes or as stuffed puppets. The sceneries often appear to be nothing but painted cardboard and any special effects are simplistic and would appear to the audience as obvious and outdated.

It is not even very hard to figure out that, as a rule, a variety of characters are played by the same set of actors; that Julian Barratt, whose main part is that of Howard Moon, can also be recognised under the costumes of, e.g. Mr Susan, Bryan Ferry and Rudi van Disarzio, while Noel Fielding, who plays Vince Noir, also appears as the Hitcher, Death, or the Spirit of Jazz. Rich Fulcher does not only portray the zoo manager Bob Fossil, but also Vince's uncle, the Ape of Death and Tommy Nookah. In drama the casting of the same actor in multiple roles would not necessarily cause anybody's attention since the size of a production often necessitates it; on television, however, one would not expect to

recognise the same face under the costumes of different characters, and an audience would usually try to assign a specific kind of meaning on the story level to such a double casting. Similarly, in the 21st century, with CGI as a widespread technique in film and television, the use of simplistic masks and costumes, too, draws the audience's attention to the artefact itself and is perceived as something deviant from the expected norm (cf. Nöth 2007:20).

In this sense, there is no sincere attempt at a large amount of realism on part of *The Mighty Boosh* as one would usually expect in television; instead there is yet again a tight connection to theatrical convention, where masks, costumes and multiple castings are still within an 'approved' norm (to a degree). The fact that the characters inside the Zooniverse unquestioningly accept those masks and costumes as a reality and act completely unaware of the obvious constructedness of their world is not unlike the behaviour of characters on a stage that seem to move in a sketchy fictional space without being aware of the audience, or the props and the stage settings as being 'unreal' in any way. The same amount of suspension of disbelief seems to be expected from the audience also: but while a live audience in a theatre would with likelihood surrender to this interpretation according to aesthetic convention, a television audience at home, will (at least initially) be startled by the patchwork look of the setting, costumes and props, all of which is untypical for broadcasting formats encountered on mainstream TV.

Again it is the clash of two genre-dependent communicational settings that will trigger the audience into cognitive action: on the one hand, the situation of being seated in front of a television set and the conventions and expectations connected to this situation; on the other hand, the contradictory signs sent by the text that instruct the viewer to 'view this like a stage show' and the text's often blatant conformity with or allusion to dramatic convention. The ensuing tension between the two discourses will rouse a permanent awareness of conventions and expectations in the viewer's mind. This, in turn, results in a simultaneous consciousness on part of the viewer of the text's nature as a constructed work of fiction, a performed show that is broadcast on television.

The meta-awareness that was more or less explicitly created by the narrators and elements in the framing sequence is thereby not restricted to this initial position, but continues to be a permanent, salient notion throughout every episode – carried by the series' makeshift look and the contradictory signals of genre and medium it conveys. It is not just an initial declaration "this is a performance of fictional events" that could afterwards be ignored or forgotten again; in fact, the very look of the series is used as a device to make sure the audience does *not* forget it.

3.1.2 Metalepses and transgressions

What has been gathered already from considering how the function of the framing sequences and the look of the story proper are somewhat in touch with one another, or work together to achieve a certain effect, is that the framing sequences and their metareferential impact are not entirely restricted to the sequences' initial position while the content proper stands closed off in itself. The ontologically higher level is not 'isolated' in the sense that it occurs at the beginning to make a single, metareferential statement about the content that follows before transitioning into an embedded level that is in itself no longer connected to the framing sequence – on the contrary. A closer look will reveal a number of metaleptic instances in which the content level appears to be invaded by the level of the narrators and vice versa. The ontological hierarchy that is drawn attention to in the framing sequence is therefore brought back to the front of the audience's minds in instances in which the boundary between the two levels – the literal 'curtain' – is transgressed.

Such text-internal transgressions of boundaries can happen in both directions. The first case to be investigated here is that in which characters inside the Zooniverse appear to suddenly 'abandon pretence' and become aware of their own status as fictional characters inside a performed story. One such instance can be found in the episode "Charlie", in which Howard falls asleep and is woken up by the publisher Hamilton Cork, who comes bursting into the room, pompously announcing that he is looking for Howard Moon, whose book he wants to publish. The scene is revealed to be only a dream

when Howard wakes up a second time, only to find Hamilton Cork burst into the room, pompously announcing that he is looking for Vince Noir, whose book he wants to publish. Startled by the similarity to his dream, yet irritated at the crucial, eventual deviation from it, Howard incredulously asks “*This* is the dream, right?”, to which Hamilton Cork replies “No, the other one was.”

The sheer impossibility of Hamilton Cork’s statement is enough to get the audience’s attention – for how should he, as a character situated on the same ontological level as Howard, know of Howard’s preceding dream and its contents in the first place, especially when he has allegedly only arrived in this very moment? It appears that for a moment, it is not Hamilton Cork speaking, but Simon McFarnaby, whom the audience has already met in the framing sequence, where he was introduced as a special guest. As part of the narrator’s ontological level, Simon McFarnaby can indeed possess knowledge of Howard the character’s dream and it seems as if in this moment, the boundary between the two ontological levels collapses and Hamilton Cork is temporarily replaced by Simon McFarnaby omniscient counterpart. Not only does Hamilton’s way of speaking change into a more colloquial tone (and afterwards revert back to a grander manner befitting the character), to indicate a certain ‘break’ in the diegesis, but there is simply no possibility of naturalising the statement in any other way.

This ontological conundrum forms a basic part of the situational comedy created by this moment. The fact that Howard does not bat an eyelid at Hamilton Cork’s impossible answer, but continues to ‘act normal’ only boosts the comic effect of the scene on the audience. At the same time, this instance of metalepsis serves to remind the audience of Hamilton Cork/Simon McFarnaby’s status as a ‘guest star’ of the show (should his grand entrance not have sufficed). Additionally, his revealing of himself not only as part of the content level, but as an actor *acting his part*, again serves to reinforce the audience’s awareness of the performativity of the show. It does not only in itself make a meta-statement as an instance of ontological metalepsis, but additionally refers back to another, preceding metareferential element, the framing sequence and

its contents, which strengthens its effect on the audience and their awareness of the fictionality and constructedness of the entire situation on screen.

Another instance in which the characters on the content level are suddenly 'invaded' by their ontologically superior alter egos occurs in the episode "Killeroo": Vince and his uncle decide to help Howard to train for his big boxing fight and, upon seeing his miserable performance, turn towards each other. The uncle asks pointedly "You know what's needed here, don't you?", to which Vince replies, with a wink at the camera "Training montage – with music!" What follows is exactly that – a montage of scenes showing Howard as he is training for his fight, with motivational off-screen mood-music in the background.

Again, however, Vince's statement represents an illogicality – as a character in the show, moving in the fictional world that is natural to him, he should not be aware of the way his world and chronology is represented on screen, much less of the conventional techniques of representation with regard to the situation they are in. Like Hamilton Cork, Vince the character appears to be momentarily replaced by his narrator counterpart, who, as one of the show's creators, obviously has knowledge and power over the shape of the discourse level. Simultaneously, Vince the narrator can very well be aware of conventions and commonly employed strategies that are then superimposed on the ontologically 'lower' level, while characters situated on this level should not normally be aware of any 'superior' plain of existence. Also, a character located on a second-degree narrative would not normally be expected to acknowledge the presence of a camera or look into it (or: at the audience) directly, whereas it is more common practice for a narrator and therefore less conspicuous.

The most radical incision into the fabric of the diegesis, however, occurs in the last episode of the season, "The Hitcher". In a conversation with his childhood guardian Bryan Ferry, Vince eventually announces that he has to leave and find Howard, to which Bryan Ferry replies "Is he in trouble?". Vince, who does not technically know where Howard is, replies "Probably. It's how the show works – he gets in trouble and I rescue him." Entirely unexpectedly Vince explicitly lays bare not only the fictionality of the present setting, but also the

rules according to which it functions. He displays awareness beyond his capacity as a character existing on the content level and again appears to be replaced by the narrator invading and commenting, more explicitly than ever before, on the level's ontological status and the narrative principles governing it.

But not only will the audience be made aware of the ontological hierarchy in this scene; they will also realise the accuracy of Vince's statement – the show is indeed more or less structured according to this overall principle. In most cases, episodes deal with Howard trying to achieve something, but getting himself into trouble and Vince almost incidentally rescuing him in the end. In hindsight (as this is the last episode of series one), almost all preceding episodes and adventures are therefore revealed as structured according to a pattern and overarching dynamics. Vince's statement refers to the show as a whole and not just the current episode. In fact, once he has spelt out the 'magic formula', it no longer appears to work for the episode itself: the now outright 'expected' pattern is flaunted in a most hilarious way (as Bryan Ferry, whom Vince calls for help, is spontaneously run over by Naboo and Bob Fossil on a mini scooter in the middle of the forest). In the end it is Howard who (indirectly) gets both himself and Vince out of trouble with the help of a lucky coincidence.

Vince's statement therefore also triggers another, more hidden meta-statement: once revealed and made explicit, conventions stop working properly. Once Vince has laid bare the structural principle, it no longer functions and needs to be replaced with something entirely unpredictable and never before seen in the show. In a way, *The Mighty Boosh* reveals its own strategy of deviation, by which it has successfully exposed conventions in all preceding episodes – and in turn breaks with its own 'tradition'. It could indeed be considered 'a break with the convention of breaking convention', through which the show itself reveals itself as nothing other than what it seeks to draw attention to: a construct of governing principles.

3.1.3 From beyond the curtain

However, there are also opposite cases of metalepsis to be found, in which it is the Zooniverse that invades the level of the narrators: this happens in the case of terminal framings as in the first episode “Killeroo”. In the episode itself, the character Jimmy the Reach threatens and offends Howard with revenge, saying that he “always gets his man”. What at first appears like an empty threat for the sake of situational comedy suddenly comes to catch up with Howard after the curtain has fallen. When he and Vince return to address the audience at the end, Howard suddenly gets knocked out by an arm shooting out of nowhere. A small circular window appears on screen, not unlike a hole in the curtain, showing the face of Jimmy the Reach saying “I always get my man.”

Again, such a transgression of a character from inside the Zooniverse beyond the boundaries of its fictional reality can only be considered startling, if not outright impossible. With the story officially ‘over’, the character wouldn’t usually be expected to act on his promise beyond the story’s time frame. The fact that he *does*, however, has the peculiar effect of casting doubt on the hitherto perceived hierarchy in the text. Should Howard and Vince, as creators of the show, have control over the fictional world? Additionally, as the Zooniverse was previously explicitly declared a construct, a show, should it not ‘end’ with the closing of the curtain? As many indicators to the fictional status of the Zooniverse and its contents as the audience is exposed to up to this point, this instance of transgression, interestingly enough, seems to imply the contrary: that the Zooniverse is an independent world in which time and action continue to run on.

A similarly ‘undermining’ of established rules are instances in which the characters inside the Zooniverse address the audience directly. Considering that they are not usually aware of the ontologically superior textual level, it seems strange that they should acknowledge the audience or the camera. Yet there is a direct addressing of some kind of ‘witnessing instance’ in the episode “Charlie”, where Vince, kicked out of the house by Howard, turns to the camera and talks to it as he walks away from the door. When he reaches his apparent

goal, he pointedly ends with “Do you mind? I’ve got some private zoo business to attend to.” He walks away and the scene changes. Unlike the above described instance in which Vince’s character seems to be invaded by the narrator, in this moment it appears that Vince simply ignores, or shortcuts the level of mediation and the ontological difference between his world and that of the audience and instead directly addresses an onlooking recipient.

Logically speaking, this address contradicts the rules that the text itself has established for itself: that the characters inside the Zooniverse be oblivious to their own fictionality and being a part of a show, while the audience is aware of both. As soon as the characters acknowledge an observing presence in their surroundings, this hierarchy is undermined and the apparent order questioned. While it cannot really be said to cause any additional awareness on part of the audience as to the show’s constructed nature, it does, however, again put a twist on the reliability of the information given: This show is entirely a fictional construct – or is it? Suddenly the signals sent appear to contradict each other. How reliable is the source of the information, the two narrators?

It can therefore be seen that not all instances of metalepsis or transgressions of boundaries in *The Mighty Boosh* work to point towards a status of fictionality. Embedded in the fabric of the show are instances and elements that, in fact, question the apparent hierarchy in the text and the narrators’ alleged superiority over the content level. Its main function is, perhaps, rather that of a humorous, paradoxical twist at the end rather than a definite, dominant statement, but it nevertheless gently touches upon the questionability of the structural system that was promoted up to that point. It appears that once the show has successfully hindered the audience from settling back into the comfort of aesthetic illusion and mimetic television by repeatedly pointing out its fictionality and mediality, it equally seeks to keep its viewers from getting too comfortable accepting that it is ‘all just show’. The aim appears to be to keep the viewers on their toes and in a state of uncertainty at all times. In a wider sense it perhaps even addresses the ‘danger’ of becoming too sure about the precise boundaries and hierarchies between levels within a text, or even the text and reality.

A similar notion is carried out in another, unusual, apparent transgression of boundaries – that of the fictional world of the narrators and the reality of the television audience: when Howard the narrator announces his intention to extensively quote Hamlet throughout the episode, Vince frowns and, in an ‘aside ad spectatores’, advises the audience: “In case you get bored, just press the red button on your remote control and you can see me dressed up as a hedgehog, dancing away!” He pulls a remote control out of his pocket to point at the button and quickly puts it away again when Howard becomes aware of his addressing the audience. While this instance in itself is not precisely metaleptic, but merely a direct address (as could be expected of an overt narrator), as well as a metareferential statement with regard to the mediality of the show as a television programme, it takes on a metaleptic character at the end of the show.

After the curtain has closed on the scene of the Zooniverse, Howard declares that he will use the remaining time to bring in some more Hamlet quotes. At this point, Vince, unseen by Howard, pulls a face and gets the remote control out of his pocket again, mouthing something at the audience while pointing at the red button. Suddenly, the image flashes to show Vince in a strange hedgehog costume, dancing while the credits begin to roll. It is as if, similar to Jimmy the Reach, Vince had somehow stepped out of the confines of his textual world and influenced reality in a way that he should normally not be able to. Not unlike the instance in which Vince as a character assumes a level of knowledge he should normally not have and thereby questioning ontological hierarchy, the narrator’s seeming transgression and influence on something outside the text casts doubt on the control that the audience has over their watching the show.

3.1.4 Ontology and textual structure – a brief recapitulation

In this first section of analysis, a number of important discoveries have been made that should be summed up in four main points before moving on:

One: the series is structurally conceived in such a way that it lays bare its own constructedness and fictionality from the very beginning on. The existence of framing sequences overtly draws the audience’s attention to the ontology of

the text and exposes the embedded 'content level' as the fictional creation of two fictional narrators.

Two: the series furthermore lays bare genre- and medium-dependent 'keys' that conventionally guide the audience's process of decoding textual signs according to medium. The series, however, does not restrict itself to one medium or genre – beyond its being a television series, dramatic and narrative conventions and devices can be detected in *The Mighty Boosh*. This simultaneous employing of multiple conventions pertaining to different media, that denies an unconscious, automatized decoding of information, points the viewer towards the discrepancy of genre conventions and internalised processes of meaning-making. The audience becomes aware of the different approaches required to successfully process and make correct meaning of information distributed by e.g. television and drama.

Three: ontological awareness and awareness of fictionality are not only produced by the initial framing sequences, but the notion is continued and supported by the specific look of the embedded story world, the Zooniverse. On the one hand, this corroborates its status of fictionality by foregrounding performance over mimesis. On the other hand it also, by deviation, makes the audience aware of the mimetic nature of mainstream television and facilitates a metamedial awareness in the audience throughout the show.

Four: as clearly and openly as the ontological hierarchy of the text is established, it does not remain unchallenged. Even though the postulation of two inherently separate 'worlds' seems clear, there are numerous instances of metalepsis where the worlds lapse into one another. While in some instances such instances remind the viewer of the status of the embedded world as the fictional product of the narrators situated on the ontologically higher level, other instances appear to humorously question this hierarchy. As clearly as the order of textual level seems to be, the text equally allows for elements that cast doubt onto the matter. By extension, this could even be said to go beyond the text, questioning not only the relation of ontological levels, but in fact the hierarchical relation between text and reality.

All of these points should be kept in mind and will be relevant for the discussion in the next section, in which the focus will be on metareferential elements and aspects primarily based on the embedded 'content level', the Zooniverse. Again, let it be pointed out that the continuous interplay between ontological levels and different genre conventions makes it difficult to draw straight lines between content and framing sequence, and a certain leeway for elements that refuse to be clearly categorised as belonging to one level of the text only must be allowed. The following section will therefore not only deal with metareferential aspects regarding 'story level' elements like characters, action and plot, but will in many individual cases also involve instances of interplay of more than one textual level or element in the creation of meta-awareness.

3.2 On the aesthetics of acting, writing and storytelling

The next focus of analysis will be the embedded story level introduced by the narrators as "the show". As has been fleetingly mentioned already the show is essentially concerned with the zookeepers Vince and Howard and their various adventures in the Zooniverse. While the low-budget look of the set and costumes has already been discussed above, it should also be pointed out again that despite its makeshift look and emphasis on textuality and performance, the (often magical) world of the Zooniverse is genuine and real to the characters moving in it. The characters will accept elements that would strike the audience as strange or illusion-breaking as natural and given and with the exception of occasional metaleptic moments none of the characters are aware of their own fictional status or that of their world. They will approach things that seem outright bizarre to the audience with a childlike naivety, which in many cases will also serve as a successful source for humour. For some members of the audience, however, some of those elements can also very well create an awareness of the text as a text, which will now be discussed.

Despite their unawareness the characters on the embedded content level manage to create metareference in a number of ways: be it by unknowingly

laying bare behavioural or plot conventions, referencing other texts or openly discussing aspects that will make the audience aware of the show as a fictional construct. This latter incident appears surprisingly often, even – especially Vince and Howard quite frequently address issues of a metareferential nature openly in their banter and dialogue, as if naturally or by accident. As characters in the story, bored zookeepers in the Zooniverse, they regularly fancy themselves actors, painters, writers or poets and discuss the aesthetics of acting, storytelling or writing. A prominent and highly useful strategy to achieve metareference in this context is that of them disagreeing with each other. Not unlike their narrator counterparts, the characters Vince and Howard are opposite personalities with equally opposite opinions, expectations and tastes. This essential difference of attitude is the engine behind the series' dynamics, in which Howard's serious and sombre attitude clashes with Vince's easy-going enthusiasm and the two are intertwined in a colourful rollercoaster ride that is the plot.

In many cases, however, this combination of opposite forces enables the raising of metareferential issues, as with some of the instances discussed below, in which Howard and Vince discuss their ideas concerning topics such as writing, acting or narrating. Unlike their narrator counterparts, they do not explicitly or consciously reveal themselves as being fictional, but implicitly remind the audience that they are, frankly, characters in a story. By openly discussing and referring to artistic conventions, principles or aesthetics, they implicitly simultaneously reveal themselves or their universe as artefacts and create meta-awareness in the onlooking audience. The way in which this is done is in many cases more complex than expected and will be discussed below.

3.2.1 "That's not a story!"

The aesthetics of storytelling are subject of the final episode of the first series, "The Hitcher". Sent to take a violent Russian bear to an animal prison, Howard and Vince are driving a car along a road through an unspecified landscape when Howard demands that Vince entertain him by telling him a

story about his childhood in the forest. If we disregard the obvious allusion to Kipling's *Jungle Book* at this point, Vince's story describes how he was raised in the forest by Bryan Ferry on a strictly vegetarian philosophy. When Bryan goes on tour, he leaves Vince with Jahooli, the irresponsible leopard. Having fallen asleep one night, Vince is suddenly visited by a cobra, who advises him "You should never sleep!" and tells him about the danger of having his face stolen by monkeys. According to the cobra, the monkey king is after Vince because he wants Vince's human face for himself. Upon hearing this, Vince succumbs to the drowsy heat of the jungle and falls asleep again.

Howard, as the listener of the story, is obviously thrilled and instantly demands to know how the story continues, but to his surprise Vince replies that the story ends there. An argument ensues in which Howard claims that the story has only just begun and they begin to discuss whether or not Vince's way of storytelling is legitimate, whether he has the right to narrate segments and declare them finished, using his authority as a storyteller to decide when to stop. Howard demands to be given a conclusion while Vince insists that leaving the ending open is 'his style' and even accuses Howard of greed for wanting to know more than Vince is willing to give. Eventually, an annoyed Howard lets the matter drop and changes the subject.

In this scene, Howard and Vince explicitly discuss principles of narrating by referring to an embedded narrative. As so often in the series, two essentially opposite opinions clash to illustrate the point: Howard's idea of what a story should look like is rooted in convention; he interprets the absence of Bryan Ferry as a guardian, the company of an explicitly irresponsible leopard and the warning of the snake as indicators that something exciting is going to follow, additional suspense roused by the fact that Vince falls back asleep despite the danger he has been informed of. For Vince, however, those indicators of a succeeding plot constitute the plot itself and as far as he is concerned, the story is told as far as it needs to be told. What is striking is his argument is his claim that he, as a storyteller, should have the right to determine the content and boundaries of his own narration.

The audience will be faced with the paradox that while Vince's argument is perfectly logical in itself – surely a storyteller should have that authority over their own creation? – it is nevertheless Howard who seems to be *right*. Vince's story can indeed hardly be called a story, which begs the question *why*. Examining this issue will lay bare latent notions of conventional storytelling, obligatory components of stories as well as typical elements and ways of interpreting them. Intertextual allusions to Kipling's well-known novel will underline this by offering an object of comparison. Ultimately, the audience will be made aware of a kind of universal conventionality of storytelling that has to be shared by both the author and the recipient, regardless of a story's individual content, in order to enable a successful communication. Surely Vince should have the right to determine the content of his story, but at the same time he must subject himself to a shared notion of narrative practice in order to be understood correctly.

In the light of the preceding seven episodes of the series, however, the discussion of narrative aesthetics also simultaneously implicitly references the show's own quite frequent deviation from traditionally expected storytelling practices (which will be discussed in more detail below). Vince's explicitly anarchic attitude towards stories and Howard's insistence on conformity to convention only seems to confirm a notion that is salient throughout the entire series: that of experimenting with traditions and thereby laying them bare. The explicit discussion of overall governing principles of narratology therefore equally serves as an implicit reference to the show's own, deviant character. The audience will be made aware of both the rules of storytelling in general and, by inclusion, of *The Mighty Boosh* as an artefact experimenting and playing with those rules.

3.2.2 “What’s your novel about?”

Of similar interest in relation to forms of metareference is the episode “Charlie”, in which the theme of writing is of major prominence. Tired of his life as a zookeeper, Howard decides to write a genius novel and become famous by showing the beginning to a renowned publisher (Hamilton Cork), who judges the quality of a work by its first line alone. When Howard gets upset about being constantly interrupted in his writing process by Vince’s whimsicalities and on-going questions about the novel’s content, he answers that the story is about an undiscovered genius “who cannot get anything done because of a monkey he lives with”. The obvious allusion to the current situation, with Howard fashioning himself as the genius and Vince as the monkey, is hard and perhaps impossible to miss for the audience. Its humorous potential, however, is multiplied when Vince fails to acknowledge the reference completely and merely replies smugly: “You’ve made a classic error. What you’ve done is you’ve focused in on the wrong character. Now, the monkey, I’m loving him, but the other guy, I’m getting *nothing* of him. He sounds like a dick.”

What Vince does with this statement is not only innocently turn the joke around to his advantage, but he also strengthens the metareferential potential of Howard’s allusion as he implicitly addresses the dynamics that the show itself is based on: the juxtaposition of two opposite characters and their struggle for dominance of focus. The discussion of the embedded story of genius and monkey serves as a kind of *mise en abyme* to highlight the concept according to which every episode is structured: mature Howard attempts to prove his sophistication and intellectual superiority to gain the upper hand and receive the respect of his world, but remains unsuccessful, while whimsical Vince succeeds seemingly by accident, despite, or possibly because of his naivety and carelessness. The fact that Howard’s joke on Vince’s expense ends up turning on him only illustrates and reinforces the point. Implicitly, the characters lay bare the principles of their story world by discussing a hypothetical embedded narrative and imposing the same principles onto it that they themselves are governed by. The audience cannot fail to notice the humorous irony of it and

simultaneously they become aware of the structural pattern that shapes the episodes' plotlines.

However, the *mise en abyme* structure also extends beyond the Zooniverse. Vince and Howard's banter about the specifics of Howard's story-within-the-story references back to the framing sequence prior to the beginning of the show and, in fact, prior to *every* episode. Arguing about the contents and focus of the show in some way or other is something that is encountered every time the narrators appear before the curtain to introduce another episode of the show, and the crucial point at the core of the argument is always a difference of perspective, expectation or attitude. The struggle for dominance that is present in the discussion of the dynamics between the genius and the monkey by the characters Vince and Howard is equal to the struggle imposed on Vince and Howard themselves by their narrator counterparts. The basic dynamic of juxtaposing opposite opinions and perspectives is carried out on all three ontological levels and explicitly discussing them at the example of the most embedded level implicitly foregrounds their existence on the superordinate levels.

It can therefore be said that the *mise en abyme* in this scene makes (meta)-reference to two different aspects: for one it makes the audience aware of the principle pattern that governs (most) episodes on the content level and for two it equally highlights the fact and way this pattern is superimposed from a hierarchically higher to a hierarchically lower level - twice. At the very least, the scene will humorously draw the viewer's attention to the ironic reflection of the situation itself, whereas in an 'ideal' case, the scene will trigger awareness of both the show's ontological levels and the governing principles of plot structure.

3.2.3 "I'm a man in a monkey suit!"

The third scene to be discussed in this context is concerned with the topic of acting and taken from the episode "Bollo", in which the zoo's gorilla Bollo has fallen ill. Trying to persuade an unwilling Howard into dressing up as a monkey and putting on a show to fool a visiting sponsor, Bob Fossil finally strikes a

nerve with him when he accuses Howard: “You can’t act, anyway!”. Indignant, Howard demands to be provided with “an ape suit, four bananas and a hot towel” to prepare for his performance.

In theory, this mere act of Howard impersonating a gorilla already implicitly refers back to Howard himself being only a fictional character impersonated by someone else, most directly his narrator alter ego and, beyond the text, the real life actor Julian Barratt. It should also be pointed out, however, that at the same time, the idea of Howard impersonating an ape is still relatively easy to naturalise and incorporate into the story world, considering his personality as a character. Its proper metareferential aspects only unfold in time. Howard’s ape performance is what triggers the development of the plot and when Death (the archetypal grim reaper with a scythe) comes looking for a sick ape and accidentally takes Howard with him, the metareferential potential of Howard’s ‘situation’ takes on more concrete shape. Sitting in a death cab on the way to monkey hell, Howard reveals to the reaper: “I’m not a monkey! I’m a man in a monkey suit!”.

The metareferential effect of this statement is already far more direct than his mere impersonation of an ape. Even if Howard himself continues to be oblivious to his own status of fictionality, for the audience his statement very much reminds of his being nothing but a character – Howard underneath the monkey costume is just another costume, that of his narrator alter ego. The metareferential force of this scene lies in the remark’s quite obvious reference back to the framing sequence preceding the episode, in which Howard (as narrator) emphasises that this particular episode of the show will give him “as an actor” ample possibilities to explore and show off his impressive acting skills. When Howard in the story therefore faces the challenge of impersonating a gorilla and refers to himself, or is referred to, as an actor or a person inside a costume, latent knowledge of an ontologically higher level is activated in the mind of the audience.

The scene triggers an awareness of ontological hierarchy and simultaneously exposes Howard the character as the product of Howard the narrator’s

performance. The metareference in this case works in two different ways: once through the implication inherent in the verbal statements themselves (“I’m an actor!”, “I’m a man in a costume!”) and a second time, to much greater effect, in relation to a corresponding, explicit meta-element in the framing sequence. At the same time the latter function blurs the ontological boundaries between narrator and character, considering their similar personalities and comparable pride and confidence in their acting skills – it is not quite clear whether Howard’s sentiment is rooted in the character or in the narrator, or both.

The scene’s effect, apart from implying the fictional status of the story and characters, therefore lies in a revealing of the show as a construct consisting of ontological levels that are hierarchically related. Not only does the reference to the framing sequence remind of the explicitly fictional status of the Zooniverse and all its inhabitants, but the slight blurring of the boundary between the two levels draws equal attention to the metaphorical and literal curtain separating two worlds and the fact that it is a dividing line not usually to be touched or crossed. The *fictum* reference³ could therefore even be said to implicitly extend beyond its initial text-internal statement, to make reference to a more general convention of clearly divided ontological levels. This is achieved through the interplay of a content-based element and a preceding element on the hierarchically superior level that is referenced.

Similarly, with regard to what has been mentioned above concerning the undermining of the established ontology, this slight blurring of textual boundary between narrator and character can be considered as important: While not being a decidedly metaleptic element as such, it nevertheless appears to cast a curious, momentary doubt on the exact boundaries between textual levels at the same time as it reveals their existence. While there is no outright transgression as in, e.g. Jimmy the Reach’s belated revenge on Howard, there appears to be a moment of uncertainty as to which side of the ontological boundary Howard is situated on in this instance, or whether the hierarchy really works as clearly and cleanly as it was established.

³ According to Wolf’s terminology denoting a truth/fiction-centred metareference, as opposed to the mediality-centred *fictio*. (cf. 2009:38)

Another, similar instance can be observed in the final episode “The Hitcher”, in which, again, the metareferential effect of an element is increased by an additional reference to the preceding framing sequence: Sitting in the car on the way to animal prison, Vince offers to show Howard a trick to entertain him. Bending down and out of sight for a moment, he straightens back up, his face apparently ‘completely transformed’, while wearing the same clothes and hair. What will be obvious to the audience as a simple replacement of Noel Fielding with an entirely different actor altogether, is, on the content level, nothing but a distinctly disturbing acting technique to Howard and he orders Vince to “put him away again!”. Bending down and out of sight, Vince then returns with his ‘usual’ face and Howard remains openly irritated.

While the scene itself implicitly highlights the governing principles of the notion of ‘acting’ or ‘impersonating a character’ – in as much as an actor does not really turn into someone else entirely – this implication is yet again strengthened by a reference back to the framing sequence. Previous to the beginning of the show, the narrators Howard and Vince discuss acting: Howard points out that his acting technique is generally taken to be rather powerful and gives two sample expressions from his repertoire, “grief of a sailor” and “Cornish guilt”. Vince, on the other hand, gives an impression of his acting by undergoing the same transformation as described above. Again, Howard seems to be annoyed and even a little unsettled and requests that Vince stop it immediately, even if Vince insists “I’ve got other characters!”.

The underlying implication of the scenes in “The Hitcher” is that of the aesthetics of acting and what it conventionally means to impersonate someone. As ridiculous and unrealistic as Howard’s renderings of “grief of a sailor” or “Cornish guilt” in the framing sequence are, they still remain within the spectrum of relative acceptability, whereas Vince seems to have crossed a line by undergoing a literal transformation. Similarly, when Howard exclaims in the episode “Bollo” that he is not a monkey, but “a man in a monkey suit”, he directly addresses the difference between reality and performance. The salient issue at the core of both instances is that of acting being an imitation of something else without truly *becoming* this ‘something else’. Vince, on the other

hand, blurs the boundary between 'being' and 'acting as' someone, not unlike the grim reaper, who is outright ignorant of the difference between the two. What is thereby revealed is the conventional idea as shared by the audience of acting still rendering the actor recognisable underneath in some way, while disbelief is somewhat suspended if necessary.

In itself the element of discussing acting in the initial framing sequence puts the entire following show into perspective, as it quite openly implies that everything within the Zooniverse is an act. Additionally, however, it is the repeated element of Vince's transformation on the content level that *forces* the audience to acknowledge the fictionality of the story as well as the ontology of the text. The element in the embedded story becomes metareferential when it refers back to the preceding discussion on an ontologically higher level. By this reference it brings the issue of ontology, performance and impersonation on the story level back to the audience's mind. The fact that the elements appear on both ontological levels in a mirrored, mise-en-abymic way additionally hints at the concept of acting not being applicable to the embedded level, but also implies that it extends to the level of the framing sequence, with the narrators being mere impersonations as well. Perhaps even more prominently than the instance of Howard's acting as a gorilla in the scene above, or the mise-en-abymic pattern of the genius and the monkey, this outright reproduction of an element from one level on a subordinate level makes the viewer aware of the existence of ontological hierarchy and at the same time, exposes the fictional, performed status of the content, not only through implicit repetition, but also through explicit discussion of acting techniques in connection with it.

What becomes evident from the above instances is that the theme of individual episodes in many cases provide ample ground for metareference, that is not apparent to the characters on the story level, but very much obvious to the watching television audience. References and allusions to the framing sequences preceding the show proper bring the established ontology of the text back to the audience's mind and, in turn, reveal the ongoing story as fictional. While the themes themselves could potentially be 'ignored' or naturalised by the viewer without triggering a consciousness of mediality or fictionality, the

additional interplay between elements situated on different levels of the text will be much harder to integrate into the story without becoming aware of the series' structural setup. The framing sequences can therefore be considered to not only serve as a guide for the interpretation of the content as such, but also provides 'anchors' for metareference, single elements or moments that come back to the audience's mind when they are repeated or referred back to at a later point inside the Zooniverse. In this way *The Mighty Boosh* consists not only of elements that are meta-referential in themselves, but also elements that enhance their own, inherent metareferential potential by additionally alluding to another meta-element and its respective meta-message(s).

There are, however, more ways for the embedded story level to draw attention to itself and its conventions – in some cases without making reference to any ontologically higher level. What can be found in a number of episodes and what will be the next point of discussion is that of plotlines foregrounding their being determined by convention. Rather than exposing the show's own fictional status or highlighting the text's ontological hierarchy – functions that have been observed frequently with the phenomena thus far – the episodes' plot structures draw attention to more widespread conventions and traditions of storytelling that can be found in many other texts. The precise way in which *The Mighty Boosh* does this will be investigated now.

3.3 Plotlines

As has been mentioned, *The Mighty Boosh* is difficult to label as any particularly subgenre of television programme, both structurally and thematically – primarily because it 'borrows' elements from a variety of different genres (e.g. mystery, adventure,...). Looking at the individual storylines of each episode of *The Mighty Boosh*, it quickly becomes apparent that most episodes tend to allude to some kind of 'plot concept' that is popular or well known, and to then parody it in some way or other. Through this parody, in turn, an awareness of convention is activated in the audience which can be regarded as metareferential in quality. The particular shape of such allusive story

conventions can vary in size, extending over an entire plot covering the whole episode, or individual, stereotypical scenes and plot elements, or both. In the following section, this borrowing of plotlines and –elements will be examined, always bearing in mind that, as all other elements discussed so far, there is a distinct likeliness of one working not alone, but in connection with other (meta)elements.

An example for borrowing or adapting overarching plot conventions would be episodes like “Killeroo” or “Electro” that clearly reference a particular ‘type’ of movie, even if no one movie in particular. In the first episode, “Killeroo”, Howard is blackmailed into opposing a kangaroo in a boxing fight. Hopeless as his situation is against his animal opponent, he is assisted in his training by Vince and Vince’s uncle, who owns a boxing studio. Howard’s personal aim becomes winning the fight and impressing Miss Gideon, the woman in charge of the zoo’s reptile house, who is blissfully oblivious to Howard’s existence on the whole. In the end, Howard manages to beat the kangaroo, but only by resorting to cheating, and furthermore accidentally ruins his chances with Miss Gideon completely. What initially looks like his expected (if unearned), glorious moment of triumph is instantaneously turned into failure.

What is interesting to see is that despite the many silly elements and jokes implemented throughout the episode, the underlying plot structure remains easily recognizable as a fairly conventional type of movie: a supposed hero down on his luck needs to get his act together and overcome all odds by winning the big fight in the end. The audience will without difficulty be able to think of at least one (but likely more than one) movie they know that proceeds roughly according to this pattern. The more ridiculous elements in “Killeroo” – like silly dance- and dream sequences, the fact that Howard’s opponent is a kangaroo, the exaggerated rival characters at the boxing school, or the mysterious mark on Howard’s chest that gets him blackmailed in the first place and finally ends his chances with Gideon – do never entirely distract from the fact that the essential plot pattern is a familiar one. On the contrary, the insertion of such outlandish elements only underlines the conventionality of the plot structure underneath.

The effect of the adaptation of convention goes beyond mere intertextuality, as the referenced instance is not one specific text or movie, but rather the conventionalised story pattern itself. While certainly triggering intertextual awareness in the audience, the humorous adaptation of convention draws the audience's attention to the fact that an entire 'type' of movies is structured according to this same principle using roughly the same elements. The fact that *The Mighty Boosh* fails to make Howard's triumph fair and genuine, or even to let him achieve his personal goal of impressing Miss Gideon, additionally highlights the traditional 'hero outgrows himself, wins and gets the girl'-ending that would normally be expected under such circumstances. The fact that everything appears to revert back to the exact same state the show started from puts a humorous twist on the audience's expectations of some kind of progress or development and underlines the artificiality and conventionality of the plot structure: it was a loosely imposed, constructed pattern, but in the end, everything remains essentially unaltered.

What is more, it is not only the overall notion of 'plot convention' that is foregrounded, but the individual components of such a plot structure are exposed as well: An obvious point is made out of Howard's admiration of Gideon, before Fossil effortlessly blackmails Howard with an unknown, mysterious secret (that remains hidden to the audience to the very end, but is stressed to be particularly horrible and scarring) and Howard suddenly finds himself facing a huge, personal challenge. Winning Gideon's heart is introduced as a by-product of Howard's victory and establishes a romantic aspect to his quest. An (explicitly introduced) sequence in which Howard is seen working out to get fit for the fight is shown, as well as Vince's worries for his best friend's life are highlighted the evening before the fight. The final fight first goes conventionally badly for Howard, until Gideon shows up and he attacks the kangaroo with new vigour and, with Vince's help, even wins. All those basic components are highlighted in one way or another and reveal themselves to the audience as perfectly stereotypical devices for this kind of plot.

The way in which those elements are foregrounded, again, varies. Taking the blackmailing scene with Bob Fossil as an example, the scene is not, as such, overly conspicuous by deviation. On the contrary, it seems almost too convenient to be true – Fossil just so happens to be in possession of incriminating evidence against Howard and there is hardly any struggle or effort to get the plot running. This is odd especially since Bob Fossil is introduced as a ridiculous, incompetent character without much coherence or logical thought. His usual reasoning is outright absurd and the fact that, seemingly from one moment to the next, he is suddenly capable of smoothly and systematically cornering and subjecting Howard to his will appears startling. Afterwards he reverts back to his original, nonsensical self. His smooth performance of the cunning blackmailer suddenly begins to reveal itself as that: a performance, a device necessary to get the plot started, rather than authentic or realistic behaviour for his character. Bob Fossil, through his untypically conventional behaviour, both reveals the conventionality of the scene and additionally sheds light on its function in the context of the plot.

In other instances, individual scenes or devices are mercilessly exaggerated, but performed with such overdone seriousness, that they thereby expose their contrived nature. For example, at the boxing studio Howard meets notorious boxers that train alongside him and that are called Jimmy the Reach and Micky the Fist, respectively. Jimmy the Reach has arms that are literally a couple of metres long, while Micky the Fist's face consists of nothing but pasted-on rubber fists. This does not only draw attention to the convention of speaking names, but also points towards the convention of introducing impressive opponent characters for the protagonist to compare and compete with. The audience will realise that such minor antagonist characters are not foreign to this type of plot, but occur frequently to raise tension. Micky the Fist and Jimmy the Reach and the degree to which their names are taken literally, convey the impression that the series tries particularly hard to conform to this convention in order to stress the seriousness of Howard's situation and, by overdoing it, expose the principle itself. As neither character can be taken seriously in any way, the focus is shifted to the conventionality of their function within the plot.

In yet some other cases, the stereotypical element is not exaggerated, but the convention is outright *broken*: when Howard spots Gideon in the crowd and decides not to give up the fight, but to give it another shot, plot convention would demand that Howard should manage to overpower his opponent the second time around. This, however, is not the case – it is only when Vince intervenes and weakens the kangaroo that Howard manages to knock it out. His victory is not genuine and all the cheer (and Gideon's admiration) undeserved. The fact that 'poetic justice' in form of an honest victory through the power of love is denied and replaced with a dirty cheat noticeably grinds against the conventional notion that was supported by the entire, preceding plot. The most important element of the story seems flawed and is thereby laid bare as an element within a larger structure of elements. The audience becomes aware of their own expectations by not having them fulfilled, and simultaneously realises the combination of elements that brought those expectations about in the first place.

In one instance in this episode, conventionally expected elements of this particular plot pattern are even explicitly remarked on: at the end of his training montage, Howard is no better than at the beginning and every bit as bound to lose as before. Vince and his uncle decide to let him fight against a weaker opponent to at least keep his morale up. This does not only contradict the general norm of the hero undergoing some kind of emotional and physical growth during the training period, but also openly references the habit of such plot patterns to include a minor challenge that has to be passed before facing the ultimate test. Even further, it references the fact that the traditional function of such minor challenges (that are usually won) is to raise expectations and suspense, both for the characters and the audience. Vince and his uncle seem to consciously make use of this convention in order to 'maintain' the plotline despite Howard's insufficiency, and to bring about something akin to a conventional outcome, after all.

It can therefore be seen at the example of "Killeroo" that the plotlines themselves have a tendency to foreground their own constructedness and conventionality. Not only do they allude intertextually to other texts, but the point

of reference is, more specifically, the conventional pattern as such that governs both the episode in question and all possible intertexts that might come to a viewer's mind. *The Mighty Boosh* activates pre-conceived, latent knowledge of plot conventions and exposes them and the elements they are constructed of. This can happen in a number of ways, but is most certainly achieved by the interplay of different techniques that corroborate each other: even the seemingly inconspicuous, conventional use of devices becomes significant and noticeable when it is embedded in primarily unconventional surroundings. In the end, the 'correct' application of convention draws as much attention to itself as open flaunting or exaggerating. The interplay between different elements of this kind serves to highlight the individual components as such, as well as their functional part in creating the plot pattern on the whole. While most of these elements remain implicit, they can occasionally assume explicit shape. The common function of those elements is a highlighting of the conventionalised, artificial patterns and elements that govern the construction of a certain type of narrative.

"Killeroo" is not the only episode for which this holds true – similar patterns can be found throughout the series to varying degree, like, for example, the episode "Electro": when Vince is invited to join an Electro band and Howard is rejected for not being 'cool enough', the story begins to explore Howard's dark past as a musical genius, "the best jazz-musician in all of Yorkshire". In a flashback, the audience sees how Howard once sold his soul to the personified Spirit of Jazz and can now no longer play any musical instrument without being possessed by it. Hints at a terrible incident that ended Howard's smashing career are dropped and Howard is fashioned as a tragic hero, forever punished by his reckless, youthful decisions. However, when a member of Vince's new band spontaneously leaves, Vince asks Howard to step in and Howard is torn between his dream of being a musician and the lingering threat of his haunted past.

Again, the theme of a protagonist battling his own past is nothing alien to popular television or cinema, and the slightly Faustian element of literally or metaphorically trading one's soul for something desired is certainly nothing new,

either. The slightly absurd, concrete context of the episode as such cannot veil the conventionality, if not stereotypicality of the plot as such. Both overly typical and radically deviant elements – like Howard desperately trying to rid himself of his curse, which ends up with the Spirit of Jazz trapped in a hooverbag – thereby gain metareferential character. Just like the episode “Killeroo”, the plot convention and its crucial components are foregrounded in a playful manner and draw the audience’s attention to the convention itself.

As a governing principle of plot construction, this strategy can be found in every episode to some extent – salient notions of a ‘plot type’ are always present to some degree, be it an adventurous quest for a lost treasure or a journey to find a former mentor, a road movie or a thriller with mutants of the Frankenstein type – every episodes engages with some part of the broad spectrum of genre conventions. Simultaneously, stereotypical plot devices are exposed and explored in a humorous way, both in their function as an element of a specific plot and their more general conventionality.

Examples for such single elements would be typical situations of ‘passing a test’, observable in the episodes “Bollo” or “Jungle”. In “Bollo”, Vince sets out to rescue Howard from limbo and, through a mirror in the shaman Naboo’s caravan, enters the Mirror World, where he meets a strange character called Mr. Susan. Vince learns that in order to escape the small room that is the Mirror World, he must find the right mirror through which to enter limbo, or be caught in a room full of mirrors for eternity. Vince, who does not care much about having nothing but his own reflection for company for the rest of time, steps through the next best mirror and incidentally ends up in limbo as he meant to. The audience will humorously notice how Vince, in his carefree attitude, cut Mr. Susan’s speech short and ignored a famous, conventional plot device – that of taking care to choose wisely from a large offer, preferably under a lot of time pressure and with high risks at stake. The familiar convention of this type of device is laid bare by being simply short-circuited. The scene is, however, not a necessary part of the plot structure like, for example, the blackmailing scene in “Killeroo”, but optional – the overall plot could well function without it, which is perhaps the reason why it does not get to fully unfold. Attention is not so much drawn to its

belonging to a larger pattern but more to its (conventional) function of creating suspense and forestalling the plot.

All of the elements in this chapter can be considered contributors to an overall, metareferentially charged notion that is salient throughout the series. As genre-defying a series as *The Mighty Boosh* appears to be, one of its main principles seems to be to extensively engage with conventions in a metareferential way, rather than to simply employ them inconspicuously. The show openly plays with rules, takes turn in following, exaggerating and breaking them, but at all times references them in some way or other. The audience is constantly confronted with their own knowledge of plot convention and increasingly made aware of the fictional, constructed nature of stories and types of plot. In many ways, this integration of allusive, intertextual or genre-specific elements also works in collaboration with the metareferential elements discussed in previous chapters and encourages the effect of other elements that, for example, draw attention to the show's fictionality. Again, as a backdrop against which individual meta-elements are placed, conspicuous experimenting with plot convention can work as a contributor to the effect of other meta-elements as well as a metareferential statement in its own right.

3.4 The Zooniverse – a metareferential space?

At this point it might be in order to make a slight logical detour and linger with the issue of reality vs. text for a moment. What has not yet been pointed out, but certainly is worth considering in connection with the show's constant engaging with conventions and rules and its tendency towards self- and metareference, is that the Zooniverse, the spatial setting of the story, bears a certain latent metareferential potential itself, in as much as its heteroreferential quality, at least, is debatable. The introductory phrase "a journey through time and space" already indicates that the setting in which the action takes place is removed from reality, a fictional construct that does not attempt to represent the real world, but constitutes its own entity. In itself, this does not necessarily constitute metareference or a disruption of aesthetic illusion (in as much as there can be

talk of aesthetic illusion), since aesthetic convention would dictate that, as something clearly (and explicitly) marked as fictional, the story world would not aim to make truth statements about the real world to begin with. Nevertheless, it contributes to a self-referential potential of the setting that can, in combination with other elements, create metareference.

The main aspect that stands out as noticeable is the specific shape of the fictional world – a zoo, cunningly termed “The Zooniverse”. The zoo is the starting point for Vince and Howard’s adventures and the home to which they return at the end of each episode in the first series. The hybrid name “Zooniverse” does also seem to suggest, however, that the entire universe of *The Mighty Boosh* is, in its essence, comparable to a zoo. What is interesting about this implication is the inherent quality of a zoo to be a conventionalised *representation* of reality rather than reality itself: animals are taken out of their natural habitat and put in cages or fenced-off areas, on display for an audience to look at. While a zoo can choose to *imitate* natural surroundings and conditions, it can never truly *reproduce* them. Visitors of a zoo, in return, are generally aware of this, yet choose to accept and naturalise the fact on the grounds of social convention.

The core issue, or implication, that is important here, also with regard to the analysis of previously discussed elements, is that of representation, mediation and perception of reality and fiction. The fact that a zoo is the core setting for a story that is for the audience already explicitly indicated and fashioned as fictional and part of a constructed text consisting of ontological levels, adds yet an additional layer of constructedness to the series: even on the central level of fictional communication the reality in which the characters Vince, Howard, Bob Fossil and Naboo move naturally is implicitly marked as fake by its very nature of being a zoo. Even if the audience were not already aware of ontology and fictionality, the ‘reality’ on the story level would not be ‘real’, it would still be a zoo, a representation of the ‘real’. Regardless of the subtlety of the implication, the basic, underlying notion of the show’s entire universe is that of its own reality – and by extension *any* reality – as a conventionalised, mediated construct that works according to specific rules.

The fact that in terms of production, the physical set of the series retains a simplistic, illusion-breaking cardboard look, with seemingly self-made costumes, low-budget scenery and makeshift props, only underlines this notion in a more prominent way. The reality of the Zooniverse looks constructed because it *is* constructed and does not attempt to hide that fact. What looks like a layman's silly attempt at producing settings, costumes and props for a show on a tight budget only strengthens the message that implicitly permeates the series: this show is a construct through and through – to the point where reality itself is revealed as a construct, despite the people moving in it considering it genuine. By extension, this could even alert the audience to the nature of their own extratextual reality that they themselves move in, and the way it is mediated by conventionalised processes of interpretation of signs.

As has been said already – the effect of this latent notion on the average viewing audience can be considered relatively small in itself. Especially when compared to more prominent and direct forms of metareference or more overt statements on fictionality and the nature of reality, this very subtle endless deferral of 'reality' onto yet another and another level of representation echoes perhaps the *mise-en-abyme* structures already discussed, implying an ever continuing text-within-the-text-within-the text layering of levels that do not only extend 'into' the text, but also beyond and 'above' the text, into the reality of the viewers. Single elements, like Tommy Nookah's statement in the episode "Jungle" – "Never stop questioning the nature of reality!" – perhaps draw attention to this otherwise subtle notion and might persuade the audience to indeed consider that very thing.

3.5 The characters – rules of convention

Beyond the spatial setting, the issue of representation and conventionalised interpretation of reality is also present in the characters that populate the Zooniverse. While – as has been pointed out – they are not usually aware of their own fictional status and move in their world accepting it as 'reality', this

does not mean they do not unintentionally reveal themselves occasionally. This can take a variety of shapes and purposes, which has already been discussed at the example of metaleptic instances, but other than that it appears that part of their comical behaviour is basically rooted in the fact that they are incapable of decoding signs in a traditional manner, or are at least at odds with conventions of decoding. This inability does, on the one hand, create humour on a fairly straightforward level, on the other hand, however, can raise an awareness of and point towards the existence of shared, social and textual rules and practices.

An extreme example for such incapacity is the zoo manager Bob Fossil, an entirely ridiculous, rude and politically incorrect character, who has been described by the creators as “bordering on retarded” (Inside the Zooniverse, 200). In this vein, his overt and exaggerated stupidity and ignorance certainly serve the main purpose of making him a laughing stock in addition to being a plot device, with recurring jokes like his not being able to remember animals’ names and therefore circumscribing them with phrases like “big, grey leg-face-man” for elephant or “hairy Russian-carpet-guy” for bear. His indignation at being corrected underlines his ludicrous personality and creates laughter on the one hand, yet on the other it can very well serve to draw attention to more essential questions like the genuine representation of reality through fiction and television, or even the nature and principle of representing reality through language.

Again, the implicit self- or (potentially) metareferential function of his character can only be considered subtle and vague at best; it is to be doubted that many viewers will take Bob Fossil’s idiocies as a starting point for serious, philosophical reflection on representability, or language and the issue of representation of reality and in the media. Nevertheless, when Howard corrects his description of pandas as “Chinese black-and-white people” and Fossil sarcastically and mockingly cries “Oh, I’m Howard Moon! I know all the animals in the zoo!”, it *could* raise the question what it means for Howard (and the audience) to be familiar with correct terminology, or, in turn, what it means for Bob Fossil not to be. Perhaps rather than direct media-awareness, such a

statement could trigger reflection on the system of language and sign systems in general, and our almost instinctive, internalised process of linguistically encoding and decoding reality as we perceive it – which would, by extension eventually return to include the show itself and cast light on the cardboard nature of characters like Bob Fossil.

Similar instances of this kind can be found with the character of Vince, who is simple and naïve in character, but certainly nowhere near as outlandish and preposterous as Bob Fossil. In the episode “Mutants” animals of the zoo have mysteriously disappeared, along with Howard, who previously sought to solve the mystery only to end up being held prisoner in the secret laboratory of the zoo owner Dixon Bainbridge. Vince is leisurely painting a picture of the zoo when he asks for advice from Naboo, the shaman, who cryptically tells him that the answer to his question is in his painting. Naboo disappears, while Vince is left staring in confusion at his picture, in which the sign ‘secret lab’ has magically appeared in red letters above one of the doors he has painted. Ironically, however, it takes Vince a considerable amount of time to figure out where the clue is and what it means.

While this, too, is obviously a gag in which the audience’s suspense can be heightened with amusement at Vince’s slowness of mind, it still – again – points towards a shared convention of decoding signs and images according to specific contexts. Vince seems to struggle with something that appears obvious to the audience, which in turn draws attention to the effortlessiveness with which the audience can decode images correctly; in fact, can decode the very series itself. In a similar situation in the very first episode, Vince manages to exasperate the shaman Naboo, who answers Vince’s request for help by throwing a cloud of glittery dust at him and is met with utter consternation on Vince’s part. Naboo eventually turns to the audience, shaking his head “It’s magic dust! What is he, a muppet?”. The audience, who will naturally have interpreted the magic dust a conventionalised element with a specific meaning, will realise that technically, Vince really is a ‘muppet’, in a sense that he is not real, but a textual construct.

While such instances of course primarily serve to rouse humour and create laughter, they foreground at the same time (if to varying degree) the unconscious, yet active process of decoding that is done by the audience the moment they understand something that Vince or Fossil fail to make sense of. This decoding stretches from the decoding of conventionalised plot elements into the decoding of signs and language in general and highlights the process of making meaning of a text or medium. It draws the audience's attention to how they make sense of the world and the media, to the automatic, internalised process by which they assign seemingly 'natural' meaning to things by following conventionalised patterns. It could perhaps be considered an extension of the playful revealing of plotlines and –elements as discussed above: this fine, but basic discrepancy between representation of reality and reality is continually highlighted in the show in form of occasional tensions between characters and convention, therefore exposing the arbitrariness of the respective convention as such. At the same time, this highlights the madeness of the characters themselves, revealing them as textual constructs rather than genuine 'people'. In a setting like the Zooniverse, where heteroreference takes the back seat and signs are foregrounded in their own right, conventional patterns of interpretation equally lose their seemingly self-understood nature.

In some cases, as discussed with Vince and Fossil above, characters are faced with circumstances that they are unable to recognise, understand or react to according to shared social convention. There is, however, also the opposite case scenario in which characters (usually Howard) try their best to *follow* conventionalised patterns while finding complete lack of cooperation on part of their surroundings. Such instances, contrary to the above cases, use the *failing* of interpretive conventions in order to draw attention to their existence and arbitrariness. The issue that is again addressed is that of how reality is conventionally encoded and perceived by society and the media by foregrounding the Zooniverse's and characters' deviation from the norm. Yet in this case the focus is on the degree to which convention can differ from actuality and result in a struggle to make sense of a situation once the connection between convention and concrete reality has broken down.

The episode “Bollo” is a good example for Howard’s continuous struggle with a seeming lack of convention all around him: In light of the expected death of the zoo’s gorilla Bollo, Howard is tricked into dressing up as a monkey and persuaded to put on a show for the visiting sponsor of the real gorilla. However, as Death (the archetypal reaper with a scythe) appears to take the sick Bollo with him, he accidentally mistakes dressed-up Howard for Bollo and attempts to take him to Monkey Hell. Howard, disillusioned and disenchanted with the ‘reality’ of death and stuck in limbo once he has pointed out the obvious mistake to the reaper, is eventually saved from hellfire by Vince and the natural order of things is restored with the real Bollo’s (temporary) death⁴.

What is particularly interesting about the episode is the conventionalised image of death as Howard maintains it and its sharp contrast to the way he experiences it firsthand. Howard, who can be seen quoting passages from Hamlet at the beginning of the episode and who continues to sport platitudes about the nature of death and the principle of a dignified departure from life, is stunned to find Death to be the taxi driver of a ‘death cab’, with a cockney accent and a distinctly undignified, business-like attitude towards his job. In limbo, a kind of central taxi office where a group of cloaked reapers are seen playing billiard and watching TV, Howard is outright admonished for quoting Hamlet, as such bleak and pessimistic views of death are not popular or welcome with “the boys”. The juxtaposition of a traditionally constructed image of death as something sombre, dignified and serious and the ‘reality’ of it as something perfectly banal and business-like that happens to everyone, again raises the issue of a discrepancy between an image constructed by social convention and the actual reality of the matter.

The scene continues to be interesting when Howard tries to come to terms with his unexpected situation by asking whether he could make a phone call, to which his taxi driver answers “You’re dead, mate, you ain’t been arrested.” While certainly providing generous occasion for humour, the scene simultaneously illustrates Howard’s vain attempts at making sense of his surroundings and grasp the underlying rules of his world by reaching out for a

⁴ Bollo returns in the second series as Naboo’s familiar and assistant.

familiar, slightly related convention and set of rules: that of having been taken into custody. However, control of the situation continues to escape him. While Vince in the case of the secret-lab incident struggles to understand a convention understood and shared by the audience, Howard is situated quite on the opposite end of the stick, so to speak. His struggle to impose a preconceived pattern onto a seemingly illogical situation is in many ways parallel to that of the audience (even if the audience can afford to be primarily amused at the confusion). Again the focus is on the power of conventions to help us make meaning of the world, but in this instance, the possible insufficiency of convention is highlighted as well – the social construct does *not* manage to contain or structure the experience as such. This foregrounds the fact that the gap between conventionalised image and reality can, under circumstances, be considerably significant – in life and, as is implied, in the media.

The scene's most important element in this context and line of thought is the grandly termed "Mirror of Life", through which Howard is allowed to watch his own funeral as compensation for having been killed by mistake. What initially looks like a magical or mystical element as it can be found in fairy tales or myths, turns out to be a television screen (there is a Woodstock DVD running when it is activated). The hitherto subtle, latent notion of reality vs. conventionalised representation of reality is suddenly taking on a much more concrete shape: on the one hand it openly establishes the television screen as a *mirror* of reality; on the other hand it equally saliently foregrounds the fact that such a 'mirror' does not necessarily show the *truth*. Howard, who is in awe at the amount of people who have supposedly shown up to his funeral, must realise with dismay that what he sees is not reality, but a Woodstock recording.

At this point, implications begin to take on a fairly critical shape: the revelation that reality and the content of the television screen don't match up comes as a definite disappointment to Howard, who would rather see thousands of people bemoaning his demise than the handful of people who actually attend his mockery of a funeral. While the previously encountered contrast between Shakespearean concepts of the nature of death and the

actual event foregrounds the constructedness of social perception of reality, the element of the Mirror of Life makes a much less subtle reference to the perception of reality as created by a television screen – it implies that the media are a determining factor in what we consider to be ‘real’. At the same time it also addresses the attractiveness and temptation of accepting what is presented on screen as reality without questioning it, which in turn, raises the audience’s awareness for their own, critical or uncritical process of decoding, for one, images on a general level and, more concretely, images of reality as represented on television.

It can be said that this element of the Mirror of Life, against the general, ongoing background notion of representability of reality that is already present in the show in general, and the episode in particular, develops metareferential potential: it foregrounds the very principle of television itself – that of referencing, or ‘mirroring’ reality to some degree – as well as emphasises the crucial issue of the artificiality and questionable truth value behind television images. Going even further, it additionally hints at the audience’s role and involvement in the reception and acceptance of this constructed reality. In Wolf’s terms, the instance of openly fashioning the Mirror of Life as a television screen creates an implicit, text-external instance of metareference that reflects on the principle of the television medium and, by inclusion, the show itself. It equally critically addresses the recipient’s role in interpreting the content of both the media and, in extension, external reality.

What can be concluded from this slight ‘detour’ is that on an implicit level, the nature of the Zooniverse as well as the comical behaviour of its inhabitants illustrate the dichotomy of reality vs. representation, as well as reality vs. television. Not only does the characters’ clumsiness and occasional dim-wittedness serve to create humour, it also implicitly fashions them and the world they move in as cardboard constructs onto which conventions are loosely (and ill-fittingly) imposed, rather than three-dimensional, thoroughly believable personalities. The series is remarkably critical, even, when it stresses the nature of television as constructed and unreal, as representation, not as reproduction. While all of these statements remain subtle in themselves, the context and the

company of other meta-elements that aim at similar messages, does, however, add weight and significance to their notion.

3.6 *The Mighty Boosh* as an audiovisual text

With all the meta-elements that have already discussed it might seem unlikely that one series could employ yet another layer of metareference without becoming completely indigestible for a mainstream audience. So far we have looked at instances of metareference situated on different textual levels that have fulfilled a variety of functions and work to create a variety of effects: foregrounding the text's ontological structure, revealing its fictionality, pointing towards plot conventions and common narrative strategies, or emphasising performative aspects, or going beyond the text to make broader statements about television and media on a larger scale. The audience is made aware of a series of aspects not only concerned with the textual make-up of the show, but also their own role in interpreting and 'reading' the signals presented to them. Before a closer look can be had at the implications of these findings, however, one more aspect of metareferential quality needs to be looked at – the one specific to the filmic medium.

Despite the many instances of metareference in *The Mighty Boosh* that can evoke general notions of 'text' or 'artefact', or some that perhaps allude more to drama or narrative fiction than television, the show nevertheless remains broadcast through the medium of television. As such it is filmed with a camera and consists as a product of an audio and video track, a fact that – as might be expected at this point – it cannot possibly let go unnoticed or unremarked upon. *The Mighty Boosh* therefore, in addition to all of the above-mentioned devices, draws on a wide range of media-specific, filmic conventions that it plays with and highlights; something that will be discussed in the section below.

In her essay on metareferential elements in popular television series, Gymnich (2007) provides an overview of the metareferential possibilities and devices that can be found in sitcoms, mystery and sci-fi series, not only on what

she calls a “mise-en-abymic level” of film-within-the-film (130), but also on a media-specific note that reveals the artefact not only as an artefact, but as an audiovisual one. This can be done by revealing or drawing attention to the perceived film or television series as a combination of two closely interacting channels of image and sound, video and audio that are usually perceived by the viewers as a unity (135-136). The audience’s attention can be drawn to either channel, or the interplay of the two, by deviating from the inconspicuous, conventionalised norm or by breaking up the smooth collaboration between sound and image and collapsing the atmospheric ‘overall impression’ the artefact has on the viewer (135).

Revealing the camera or laying bare the image can involve, for example, a character’s direct look into a conventionally invisible camera (137) – although in the case of *The Mighty Boosh*, this merits discussion, cf. 3.6.2 below – or drops of water visible on the camera lens, as well as changes of image quality, obvious camera movements or disturbances of the visual signal entirely (137). Conventionalised colour quality of the image can equally be used as a device for metareference – and as will be seen below, such devices are rather frequent in *The Mighty Boosh*, in a specific way.

Drawing attention to the audio track of a film is very often done in connection with what Chatman (1999:320, cited in Gymnich 141) called “mood music”. In an inconspicuous interplay with the visual film, such extradiegetic mood music creates atmosphere and carries and supports emotions in a subtle way that is not usually consciously perceived by the viewer, but accepted willingly (141-142). Radically interrupting the extradiegetic music, however, makes the audience aware of the existence as well as the artificiality of this convention (a device which, however, as Gymnich points out, is well underway to becoming itself conventionalised (142)). What can, however, also be done is adding another layer of meaning or implication to a scene by creating intertextual references on the level of “mood music”, or by “mismatching” or contrasting visual and audio information. In all these cases, attention is drawn to the function of “mood music” as a contributing factor to the meaning and overall atmosphere of the scene.

All the above-mentioned devices occur across popular television and are often used to create moments of unexpected laughter, present a slightly ironic self-image or pay humorous homage to an existing genre tradition, or another television series of a similar kind (143). At the same time, the intertextual, contrastive and/or comparative aspect of such elements serves to foreground conventions and audio-visual characteristics on a larger scale, reflecting not only on the text itself, but on the entire genre it belongs to. In the same vein, *The Mighty Boosh* makes use of conventions and draws attention to image and sound, but, as will be discussed now, the strategy that the show employs to do so is slightly different from what has been pointed out so far.

3.6.1 The 'Meta Boosh' way of television

Not only on the content level is *The Mighty Boosh* a patchwork quilt of genre and plot elements, using conventionalised strategies and devices from the gothic novel, adventure tale and fairy tales alike to combine to a colourful whole containing mad scientists and talking animals, that emphasises the variety of stories and their individual features. It does, in fact, do the same on the level of form, very specifically pointing at the conventions and the variety of a medium much younger than narrative fiction – that of television. Playing with the possibilities offered by the medium of film and television, the show metareferentially makes the audience aware of the influence of the camera eye and the filming technique on the reception of the series, and the way meaning is made according to seemingly unconscious signals of the television image.

Despite the many indicators in the series that draw the audience's attention to the 'textuality' and 'performativity' of the show, like the references to acting, the makeshift props and sceneries, etc. there are simultaneously also elements that remind the audience of the audiovisual television context through which the show reaches them. While in many cases the camera eye remains inconspicuous, there are scenes and moments in which its presence is made obvious to the viewer. (One could, for example, count instances of direct address of the audience into this category, but the main focus of this section will

be another.) *The Mighty Boosh's* most popular strategy in this context appears to be the implicit metareferential effect of experimenting with a 'patchwork' of filmic genre conventions. Every episode does at some point make open use of specific filming techniques that will be recognised by the audience as belonging to a specific genre of film, be it a thriller or romance movie as subcategories of narrative films, or different formats altogether, like e.g. a particular subgenre of music video, a documentary or a commercial.

To illustrate, the episode "Killeroo" features what appears to be a clip from a news interview: when Vince reminds Howard of an incident in which Howard accidentally killed a koi carp by crying excessive amounts of salt water into its pond, the scene is interrupted by a sequence in which said koi carp (paradoxically) reports on his experience to an implied news reporter. The scene then switches back to Vince and Howard's conversation. Similarly, in the episode "Bollo", Vince experiences a flash of inspiration how to save himself and Howard, and pulls a previously purchased can of Naboo's Miracle hair wax out of his pocket. Before he acts to save the day, however, he takes a moment to turn to the camera in a close-up and he winks at it, lifting the can to his face saying "With Naboo's Miracle Wax!". The short ring of a bell is audible; only then does the scene resume.

What the audience will immediately notice is how without formal announcement, even a slight change in camera perspective or lighting can make the difference between one genre or format and another and effortlessly turn a moment of utmost suspense into a commercial. The viewer will realise how filming techniques influence the perception of the content and how different genres employ certain conventionalised devices of both filming technique and sound effects to fashion themselves as what they are. At the same time, the scene with Naboo's Miracle Wax might remind of the habit of television channels to interrupt movies and series at suspenseful moments to squeeze in a commercial break. The scenes therefore not only showcase specific types of television programme and the way they are composed of collaborating sound and image, but also reference television landscape at large, the variety of forms it contains and conventions by which those forms are arranged and presented.

The way *The Mighty Boosh* uses these strategies is, not unlike the way it sometimes employs plot elements, so obvious and overdone that the audience will become conscious of the way they respond to images presented in a particular way and how their interpretation of information will change accordingly. This can be done, as above, by ‘inserting’ sequences that denote a different audiovisual genre than the one of ‘narrative film/series’ (like, e.g. a news report, commercial, but also music video, etc.) and thereby positioning the show within a wider referenced field of different kinds of audiovisual formats available on TV. However, another way of creating media-awareness in the audience that can also be detected and that stays within the field of ‘fictional narrative television’, is the employing and foregrounding of conventions usually associated with particular *kinds* of films or series, like, for example, a suspenseful scene, or an emotional, romantic scene as they might be encountered in mystery films, thrillers or drama series.

For example, at the beginning of the episode “Mutants”, one of the zookeepers gets abducted from the reptile house one night, a mystery that Howard and Vince then try to solve. The initial scene of the episode employs a number of ‘mysterious’ devices that establishes the atmosphere: it is dark and foggy and the music resembles the hoot of an owl. The camera is positioned in a high place and looks down at zookeeper as he is strolling through the zoo, whistling slowly. When the camera angle changes to a lower one, the character’s flashlight frequently points directly into the camera, temporarily obscuring the vision of the audience. The sound of shattering glass is audible and a close-up on the zookeeper’s suspicious and alert face is followed by a frame showing the entrance of the reptile house while lightning and thunder conveniently occur for dramatic effect. The next shot is taken from within the reptile house as the zookeeper pushes the doors open with a creaking sound, his flashlight again directed straight at the camera. A quick zoom around the inside of the room shows a shattered glass of an empty reptile case, the beam of the flashlight first illuminating the hole in the glass, then the shards on the floor. We can see the zookeeper, illuminated from above so his face is badly visible in the surrounding darkness, trying to make sense of what he sees, when

he suddenly turns around as if startled by a sound. A gloved hand hits him out of nowhere and he falls to the ground unconscious. The flashlight is seen rolling across the floor from a low angle and the scene changes to the next day, where Bob Fossil gives a tour of the zoo to a group of school children, during which it is later discovered that a whole number of animals have, in fact, recently disappeared from the zoo.

What the audience will notice is the genre-specific setup of the initial night scene and the number of typical elements that make it what it is: the fog, the contrasts between dark and light, the way the flashlight is pointed at the camera to 'blind' the audience, the way lightning and thunder occur at exactly the 'right' moment, the way camera angles and shots are employed in a strategic and conventional way to create suspense. In this instance, the audience is not made aware of the video or the audio track because of *deviation* from convention, but because of their *conformity*. In an – admittedly clumsy and slightly parodying way – everything is in perfect accordance with the cliché. What makes the scene stand out and what draws attention to this setup is its deviation from the rest of the episode: while the initial scene creates an atmosphere befitting a certain type of mystery or crime series, this atmosphere is not upheld throughout the rest of the show and none of the suspense is carried over into the following scenes.

This metareferential potential of a quotation of form that has been investigated by Böhn (2009) can therefore be said to hold true for *The Mighty Boosh* and its employing of generic filmic conventions, too: rather than being employed as modes of representation, they are employed as *references* to modes of representation and marked by a "noticeable rupture between the main form and the quoted form" (597). The series tries to convey a certain image and set of associations with this scene by quoting a specific form of representing information that is borrowed from a genre of television series in which such scenes can frequently be found. What this achieves, however, is a highlighting of the form, both the visual and the auditive, in the process of quotation itself because it is not seamlessly or smoothly integrated into the rest of the episode.

The conventionally harmonious working-together of audio and video track is therefore not laid bare by breaking up their connection, but by failure in consistency from scene to scene, or at least a lack of smooth transitions in and out of such 'genre-typical' scenes. The 'default' way of filming *The Mighty Boosh*, as far as it is discernible, is surprisingly inconspicuous and unexperimental; it is the show's frequent use of audiovisual settings that are in some way charged with genre-specific associations that causes metareferential awareness in the audience. This results in every episode constituting a patchwork of different conventionalised or (stereo)typical scenes or sequences that lay bare their conventionality through the contrast in which they stand to their textual surroundings. Typical camera angles and light settings traditionally used for filming, e.g. a boxing fight, become obvious when the next scene is shot in a way that does not tie in with the associations and atmosphere of the previous one. At the same time, frequent alternations between different genres additionally heighten the audience's perception with regards to genre-specific ways of presenting images in collaboration with sounds.

Rather than drawing attention to only the video or only the audio track, breaking up the connection between them or in any other way deviating from the smooth interplay between the two, *The Mighty Boosh* leaves the unity intact within individual scenes – it is between subsequent scenes that the break takes place. It is through inconsistency that the show lays bare the conventionalised way in which different genres use the interplay of specific images and supporting sounds to create atmosphere and highlight particular scenes and important elements. At the same time, it alerts the audience to the ease with which different genres can be recognised and interpreted correctly, pointing towards their widespread application in a variety of television series of all genres. Similar to the already discussed borrowed plotlines and –elements, *The Mighty Boosh* adopts appropriate filmic conventions for those elements, making sure that a plot element or device taken over from a suspenseful thriller is also presented as one, that Howard's (in)glorious boxing fight against the kangaroo is filmed the way they usually are. In an often tongue-in-cheek way, *The Mighty Boosh* pay playful homage to the broad spectrum of television conventions by borrowing and referencing elements and concepts from everywhere.

3.6.2 Audio and video separated

Apart from the overall tendency and habit of the series to draw attention to different genre-related conventions as regards the interplay between audio and video track, there can, however, also be found smaller, individual moments in which attention is drawn to either of the two. These moments are rarer and occur less as a habit and rather as sporadic elements that focus on revealing either the madeness of the image or the presence of the sound track. Especially with regard to the visual component, many of these are, as Gymnich remarks, well on the way to being conventionalised themselves (2007:142), as they can be observed across television without particular metareferential function.

Such instances in *The Mighty Boosh*, for example, are interruptions of the video track with single stills or animated pictures like in the episode “Tundra”, where Vince and Howard’s expedition to the Arctic and their return with the egg of Mantumbi is concluded by the presenting of a series of newspaper articles with pictures and headlines that convey the further development of their adventure. The same device re-occurs later in the series, in the episode “Hitcher”. Similarly, in the episode “Jungle” Howard enters the jungle room bracing himself for dangerous adventure. The scene is followed by a black screen and the writing “seven minutes later”, indicating the passing of seven minutes between this scene and the next. Flashbacks and memories are indicated by a transition from colour to black and white, or by a sepia tint of the image (cf. episodes “Bollo” or “Electro”). While all of these foreground the image as such, none of them, however, is very likely to cause media-awareness in a viewer. All of these practices are popular devices that form part of television and are likely accepted unquestioningly by the audience. It is at best their humorous content or their textual surroundings that highlight them as devices, but generally, their metareferential potential remains weak.

A more obvious hinting at the mediality of the series occurs in an instance in which Bob Fossil calls Dixon Bainbridge on the phone. Bainbridge, who is at this point hunting rhinos in Africa, is shown running in front of a white canvas onto which footage of a charging rhino is quite obviously projected. Bainbridge,

who appears to be running on the spot in front of the canvas while talking to Fossil, eventually throws himself to the ground, 'out of the rhino's way'. Nobody in the audience could possibly accept the scene without looking right through the technical setup. While this ties in with the overall, already discussed, low-budget cardboard look of the series and serves to specially highlight it yet again, it also, however, hints at the old filming practice of shooting scenes in front of moving canvas backgrounds that can be found in older movies, e.g. where scenes in cars were filmed in precisely this way, if with a little more mimetic effort. The element of Bainbridge hopping about in front of a rampant rhino therefore not only reinforces the show's own status as an artefact, but also references an old cinema tradition, extending the notion of 'construct' beyond the text itself onto the entire genre: any movie image has always been a construct, no matter how visible or invisible it is to the audience.

Similar individual elements of foregrounding also occur in connection with the audio track: In the episode "Mutants", an impression of a quiet afternoon at the zoo is conveyed by showing the empty halls of the zoo in warm light, with employees relaxing and enjoying the peace. The mood music in the background is slow and languid. The harmony of the scene is radically broken, however, when the camera moves to show a group of zoo employees sitting with instruments, playing the very melody that is audible. From one moment to the next, the audience must realise that what they considered to be extradiegetic 'mood music' is really intradiegetic music played by the characters. This sudden ontological relocation of the audio track successfully reveals the conventionally extradiegetic status of such 'background music' and draws attention to the components of audiovisual texts. The audience is made specifically aware of the conventionalised status of mood music as 'part of the whole', but not 'part of the actual diegesis'.

Another such instance in which the audio track is specially targeted and revealed occurs in the episode "Electro", where an upset and very much out-of-character Vince uses a swear word that is 'beeped out'. In a verbal fight with Howard, during which Howard accuses Vince of having changed and not being himself, Vince answers the question "What about the zoo?" with an angry "F***

the zoo!” When Howard, startled, asks him to repeat what he said, Vince, again, curses “F*** the zoo!” Not only is the offensive word beeped out twice in quick succession, but in the entire first series, this is the only time such a thing occurs, which makes it all the more conspicuous: this sudden censoring of the audio track takes the viewer aback and makes them aware of the mediating authority between the characters in the story and the viewer witnessing the scene. The audience is reminded that they are not, in fact, privy to an actual occurrence, but recipients of a ‘filtered’ version of this occurrence. Bad words are not to be spoken on television, therefore the audio component of the programme is edited – and successfully laid bare to the viewer.

What can be concluded from the above chapter is that *The Mighty Boosh*, in addition to raising metareferential issues of a media-independent type, also refers to its own medium of television in a metareferential way. As such the show draws the audience’s attention to its consisting of both an audio and a video track that work together to create a harmonious whole. The series does this by, for example, drawing attention to either just the visual or just the auditive channel, although this tends to happen sporadically rather than habitually. More often, however, this interplay is highlighted not necessarily by breaking up the connection, but by keeping it conspicuously intact within one scene and instead radically deviating in between scenes. Different generic patterns employed in adjacent scenes therefore reveal the formulaic, conventionalised combination of audio and video elements to construct the ‘whole’ in different genres or formats. The audience becomes aware how components of both tracks influence the way the image is perceived and interpreted and which associations arise from different combinations. In this way, *The Mighty Boosh* roughly maps out the breadth of television genres and conventions and gives an overview of the different forms that are – consciously or unconsciously – processed by the viewer.

IV. FUNCTIONS

4.1 Pause and recap

Looking at the size and scope of the analysis above, it might be beneficial to pause and recapture the most important intermediate conclusions to be drawn from it before moving on to discuss functions and implications.

Returning to Wolf's initially proposed model for analysis, we can see that *The Mighty Boosh* offers examples for each category: Both explicit and implicit metareferences can be detected. The scope of these references sometimes remains text-internal or intracompositional, as well as it occasionally extends beyond the text itself to make more general statements that apply to the series itself indirectly through inclusion. We find meta-elements that target the series' fictional status, as well as elements that are concerned with the mediality and madeness of the show. While the larger part of those elements serve to create humour and remain relatively uncritical in nature, there can, however, also be detected instances in which metareference is used to be critical of e.g. the relationship between reality and television.

Additionally metareferential elements are not constricted to either form- or content level, but can be found on all textual levels. We can therefore conclude that *The Mighty Boosh* appears to employ a large variety of differently shaped meta-elements without specialising in only one or two of Wolf's proposed categories in order to cater to one particular agenda. Rather than directing the audience's attention towards one single issue by means of individual elements, the series seems to play with meta-elements of many forms and to many effects, almost 'for the sake of it'.

What has also been shown and pointed out is that, in fact, individual elements cannot always successfully be isolated and examined in singularity. Rather than a collection of meta-elements, the show contains a more complex 'network' of metareferential instances that are often connected, or that work together, e.g.

one triggers the other, or one refers back to the former, 'reminds the audience' of another, etc. Durative elements, like the look of the series, borrowed plotlines that structure an, subtle notions and implications inherent to the setting, the text's ontology, for example, can be brought (back) to the front of the audience's mind and highlighted by the occurrence of 'smaller', more singular elements, like a character's comment in a dialogue. For example, when Howard says "I'm not a monkey! I'm a man in a monkey suit!", this is not just in itself an implicit metareferential statement, but in the context of the episode, triggers a whole chain of knowledge in the audience's mind: not only does it draw attention to the show being a performance by the narrators, the reference to the narrators also includes all the metareferential information that is connected to them, like e.g. the show's ontological structure, the principle of acting that was discussed by the narrators prior to the show as well as the fictionality of the entire context of Howard dressing up as an ape in the first place. In this way, meta-elements across the series create a multi-layered system of references between them, so that the triggering of one will often result in the activating of at least one other. An element that is in itself perhaps explicit and text-internal, might be giving rise to an implicit text-external reference that by inclusion highlights yet another meta-aspect.

In this sense, it seems little productive to consider all of the above instances in isolation – tearing them out of context will result in a considerable loss of relevant information. Similarly, accounting for all the possible cross-references and combinations of elements would not only yield vast amounts of data, but also result in a loss of clarity. What this paper will therefore investigate in the following sections is the function of the entire *collective* of metareferential instances as a dynamic whole. Rather than focus on individual subcategories, it will postulate and treat this network of metareferential elements, notions and connections as a single component of the show itself. The effect and function of metareference in *The Mighty Boosh* does not so much arise from single devices pursuing single goals, but from the sum amount of metareferences within the show working together to any number of ends.

Considering the complexity and the amount of metareferences that we can detect in the series, the variety of forms and functions the spectrum displays and the way it permeates every textual level, it seems legitimate to regard it as an integral element of the show in its own right, rather than a number of elements scattered throughout it. *The Mighty Boosh* is a show for which metareference constitutes not only an 'added bonus' or 'added commentary', but an integral part of its setup. Revealing its fictionality, mediality, etc. is part of its default message rather than an additional message, or added layer of meaning. The show makes sure that at no point the audience will forget that they are watching a show, a piece of fiction, broadcast on television – all textual levels are permeated by a dynamic system of meta-signs that maintain this notion throughout the show with fluctuating intensity.

With this (intermediate) conclusion, however, the issue of aesthetic illusion begins to become slightly problematic: can there even be something akin to immersion in a text that places continuous emphasis on its own status as a performed, fictional artefact, that constantly reminds the viewer that they are watching a construct instead of trying to 'pull them in' and make them forget? It can be assumed that the rational distance that the text itself positions the audience at will be fairly difficult to bridge for any viewer, to a point where any suspension of disbelief must become an outright conscious effort. A successful upholding, or even establishing, of aesthetic illusion will prove difficult if the text constantly directs the audience's awareness at least partly towards the show's fictionality, textual structure, mediality, or towards themselves as viewers.

What is interesting to observe, however, is the degree to which viewers nevertheless become emotionally invested in the series – to the point where the small series breaks into mainstream entertainment and hundreds of thousands of people come to see *The Mighty Boosh* on tour, often themselves dressed up as characters from the Zooniverse. Regardless of the degree to which the show refuses to let its viewers become immersed, it still appears to hold certain appeal that immensely fascinates and enthralls a broad target audience. The obvious question at this point is: Why? What is it about *The Mighty Boosh* that entices so many different target groups?

Explanations, of course, are manifold and it would be folly to propose that metareference must be the only and main reason for the show's popularity. In the following section, three *non-metareferential* textual aspects that appear most immediately relevant will therefore be discussed and proposed as partial explanations for the show's appeal: the characters, the element of magic and the genre of comedy. Let it also be said up front that they are not meant to exhaustively explain the popularity of *The Mighty Boosh* on non-metareferential grounds, but much rather offer alternatives to the metareference-based suggestions and argumentations that will follow. Considering the variety among the show's target groups, it is only realistic to assume that different people appreciate the show for different reasons and therefore it is reasonable to take into account other explanations and to put what might appear like the 'mainstream victory march' of metareference into perspective.

4.2 Characters, magic, comedy

One thing that both Julian Barratt and Noel Fielding have repeatedly pointed out over the years with regard to their comedy's 'weirdness', is the importance of characters. According to their philosophy, the characters need to be genuine, consistent and believable above all (*AV Club*, 2007, *LA Weekly*, 2009). As long as this is given, the absurdity of the world they move in, or even the specifics of their look no longer matter too much. What is integral is that the audience can somehow relate to the personality of the characters, whether it be an Ape of Death with confidence issues, or an ancient, green Cockney hitch-hiker with murderous tendencies and a liking for jazz. Similarly, Vince and Howard's personalities and the dynamic of their friendship, all of which remains essentially unchanged, forms the vital 'core' of the series (*Liverpool*, 2008). As such this dynamic exists on *both* main ontological levels of the show and stays largely unaffected by its metareferential commentary, even when their dynamics are openly pointed out (cf. the dialogue with Bryan Ferry).

I could be argued that it is this genuine quality of the characters, especially the main characters, that persuades the audience to become emotionally invested in the show. In this vein it is the personalities of the characters that establish a connection with the audience and keep them interested and fascinated: Vince's bubbly naivety, Howard's anxious confusion and especially the sincerity at the core of their friendship. Emotional authenticity of character, regardless of whether it might occasionally be challenged (cf. 3.5), becomes the main priority and will persuade a viewer to 'surrender' to the show on this specific level and make it possible to disregard the anti-illusionist surrounding the characters move in. Illusion of character overrules (dis)illusion of fictional reality.

A second aspect that needs to be mentioned, especially in relation to this 'fictional reality', is the element of magic that is always present in the show. The Zooniverse as a fictional world includes magic as a given, everyday thing. Similar to fairy tales, the world of *The Mighty Boosh* includes a shaman, mythical creatures, talking animals, enchanted objects, etc. as part of everyday life, and consulting Naboo for a magic potion or meeting the personified Spirit of Jazz are not in themselves considered to be anything out of the ordinary or supernatural by the characters. The audience, too, is therefore persuaded to adopt a more fairy-tale like approach to the series and will accept elements typical of fairy tales according to convention.

The speculation offers itself whether such an adjustment on part of the audience also perhaps broadens tolerance for other kinds of 'strange' or 'irrational' elements, like meta-elements. In a context of talking apes and grim reapers driving taxi cabs and Vince walking through mirrors in order to save Howard from limbo – is it really that startling to watch textual levels collapse for a moment, or to be reminded of one's own situation of watching a television series? Does a magical setting like the Zooniverse, in which the rules of nature do not apply as they do in the audience's own reality, widen the scope of tolerance in the audience? It is tempting to suggest that for at least a part of the audience, the element of magic in the show unlocks the door to a more general acceptance of 'impossible things', of whatever specific nature they might be. While this is not to say that such a viewer will be entirely impervious to the

show's self-revealing habits, it is nevertheless reasonable to assume that they might be less disrupted or irritated in their viewing process.

The last aspect that should be pointed out before moving on to metareference-based explanations of the television audience's appreciation of *The Mighty Boosh* is that of the series' nature as a comedy show. As has been pointed out (and where not pointed out, there implied) throughout the analysis of the individual meta-elements, they are in their essence *funny*. *The Mighty Boosh* does not employ metareference primarily in order to raise awareness, but to create humour – awareness is a secondary (if not necessarily subtle) effect in most cases. At the surface, however, metalepses, intertextual allusions or lines with a metareferential double meaning are supposed to create situational comedy and laughter. Rather than continuously confronting the audience with the 'hard facts' that they are watching nothing but a fictional television programme, *The Mighty Boosh* remains playful about its own self-revelations and to the viewer awareness will often kick in simultaneously with amusement. This, in turn, makes meta-awareness a by-product of a pleasant experience instead of the result of e.g. a radical break through the fourth wall.

It can therefore be said that *The Mighty Boosh* can 'get away with' all its metareferential tendencies because it does not use metareference to alienate, but to amuse. A playful approach to its own constructedness, coupled with a set of characters that retain a genuine and authentic core that the audience can relate to, can indeed compensate for a lack of aesthetic illusion and maintain the audience's interest and enthusiasm. Additionally, a diegetic context that is accepting of the 'supernatural' might also be considered to make it easier or less disruptive for the viewer to face 'unnatural' textual behaviours. It should therefore be pointed out that there are indeed explanations for the show's popularity despite its metareferential habits. It remains enjoyable as a colourful and magical piece of slightly absurd, but sincere comedy.

4.3 The charm of discourse

What appears more intriguing to consider, however, is the opposite possibility: the show's popularity *because* of its metareferential habits – assuming that the audience does not merely tolerate metareference, but, in fact, *appreciates* it. In face of the broad range of people of all age groups and from different social contexts, who watch and enjoy the show, it is not at all off the mark to suggest that for at least one part of the audience the metareferential shenanigans of the show are themselves a source for pleasure, a reason to keep watching. What if we postulate this self-revealing, attention-seeking habit of the show as the very reason people become so fascinated with it?

If we look at the broad spectrum of different metareferential devices and forms that can be found throughout the show, one reason to explain this variety, or one function to assign to it, is the fact that it keeps monotony at bay. This comparatively large amount of metareference is perhaps more easily digested because (as has been shown) it changes its form, content and aim, not always focusing exclusively on awareness of one specific textual or contextual aspect. *The Mighty Boosh* does not systematically draw attention to one meta-issue, or one meta-aspect per episode, or does in any other way structure elements to achieve one particular goal. Much rather, the show employs metareference spontaneously and at random, scattering intra- and extracompositional, implicit and explicit meta-elements according to no particular pattern. The show plays with the viewer's awareness by constantly redirecting it to a different aspect, by broadening it or even by letting it zone out only to tear it back into full consciousness. It plays with awareness for the sake and the joy of playing, not for the sake of pointing out any one issue in particular.

The Mighty Boosh resembles perhaps a cognitive roller coaster that actively engages its audience, demands the viewer's active response and in exchange never becomes entirely predictable. In this way it creates the effect of 'not being able to stop looking', one quality Fielding himself was quoted to mention at the beginning of the paper. The show refuses to let its audience sink back into their armchairs and passively consume the show – it keeps them on their toes by

drawing their attention in a way that is not conventional, by openly revealing itself on the content level as well as on a formal level, by startling the viewer with illogicalities and impossibilities. It is this playful teasing of the audience's mind that becomes fascinating in its own right. Irrespective of the specific content of the plot, the viewer becomes intrigued by the way the text engages them in a dialogue, a negotiation of knowledge, and how this creates a tension between the expectations brought to the show and the way the show plays with and reveals them as conventions. Watching the show becomes an active, light-hearted struggle to process and determine 'what's going on', with the viewer conscious of convention, the text and the self.

Beyond the elicitation of humour and laughter as well as an awareness of text(s) and media, the show additionally achieves self-awareness of the audience – ontological conundrums become intriguing and the recognising of conventional plot patterns and filmic conventions always simultaneously direct the viewer's attention towards their own knowledge and skill. The detecting of many of the meta-elements is based on previous knowledge and understanding of convention, meaning that you cannot recognise a parody if you are not familiar with the original. In this sense, part of the pleasure that can be taken from *The Mighty Boosh's* meta-character is rooted in the viewer themselves and in the satisfaction that can be gained from understanding something that can only be understood with a necessary set of skills – a certain level of media competence. In some way the show seems to make it rewarding to have watched a lot of television; it will point the audience towards the things they have learned and the skills they have acquired, no matter how unconsciously.

It could be said that in their playful, fantastical manner, *The Mighty Boosh* confront the viewer with the entire range of their media competence and skills, which makes the watching of the show intriguing, rewarding and enjoyable. It provides entertainment and satisfaction not only on the content level, but also on a more rationally removed level, on which the audience takes pleasure in the dynamics and diversities of form and convention, as well as their own expertise in recognising and interpreting them. And while this additional level of interaction might be considered damaging to aesthetic illusion and immersion in

story and plot, it nevertheless creates an entirely own fascination to draw the audience in with.

4.4 Where do we go from here?

The question that necessarily arises from the above conclusion is: just what does it say about metareference, the media and society? In the light of the already mentioned and discussed 'metareferential turn' (cf. 2.3), what is to be made of a series like *The Mighty Boosh*, in which displaying text(s) and conventions is not just an added element, but an integral part of the show? And what does it say about an audience whose interest is roused and kept by the show's self-commentary and metareferential strategies rather than its content? A number of possible interpretations offer themselves at this point, some of which will be discussed below.

One way of interpreting the show's popularity with a broad range of audiences could very well tie in with what Wolf describes as a rather pessimistic view of the metareferential turn in the media: a phenomenon of exhaustion. In this vein, the only chance for *The Mighty Boosh* to be original and interesting is an escape into metareference, as content alone is no longer sufficient when it comes to entertaining an audience that is overexposed to the media to begin with. The only way to still get away with an idea like *The Mighty Boosh* is to thematise the constructedness and the textuality of the show, while becoming increasingly void in content and 'socially pointless' (Wolf, 2011:29ff.). Instead, the show presents an artificial universe that is removed from reality and social context. And indeed it is tempting to view the whimsical, chaotic whirlwind that is *The Mighty Boosh* as proof that heteroreferentiality is at the end of its line and has exhausted itself, no longer able to entertain an audience who has 'seen it all before'. Heteroreferential television is at a crisis when content alone is no longer enough.

While such a view of the matter is certainly not invalid, my argumentation will, however, adopt a less bleak perspective and explore other implications – and

not only because assuming the above cuts short a great deal of potential discussion. It appears little rewarding with regard to *The Mighty Boosh*, to declare the whole range of its complexities and idiosyncrasies as mere signs for a postmodern crisis, since it would only turn discussion back onto the text to illustrate how individual components function as evidence of this crisis without expanding the scope of the function itself. What I would rather like to explore is the way *The Mighty Boosh*'s metareferential character develops functions of a more productive nature, adopting a more optimistic approach to the 'metareferential turn':

One initial reason to disregard an 'apocalyptic' view of the metareferential elements in *The Mighty Boosh* might seem perhaps too straightforward to be valid, but is nevertheless justified: because it is *funny*. It is optimistic. The show is, in its essence, light-hearted, fantastical and magical and its tone remains free of sober or bitter criticism even in its self-revelations. While this is not to say that laughter cannot often serve to hide a very serious issue underneath the cheer, *The Mighty Boosh*'s laughter is not ironic, sarcastic or malicious. On the contrary, it adopts and is permeated by an almost naïve enthusiasm on all levels: the characters and their adventures are fuelled by a childlike sincerity that extends as far as onto the level of metareference. Rather than exposing itself and its components with an air of resignation, the enthusiastic atmosphere transforms this self-revelation into a celebration of its forms.

In the same way in which the characters walk through their world with a sense of wondrous marvel and innocent excitement at the places, creatures and objects they encounter, the show on the whole approaches itself. The narrators give concrete shape to this attitude by discussing the show and displaying a sense of anticipation and impatience, proud of their achieved product and thrilled to share it with the audience. The audience, in turn, cannot help but be influenced by this thrill and while they are irreversibly alerted and aware of the seams that hold the show together as a text, they are equally manipulated by the sincerity they know (or believe) to be behind it. The viewers are convinced that no matter how blunt, illusion-breaking or obvious a device might seem to them, it was implemented by Vince and Howard with the very best of intentions.

It is interesting how the argument seems to get back to the characters (more specifically the two narrators) and their already discussed potential to counterbalance the off-putting effect of metareference in order to keep the audience interested. In this case, the characters achieve even more than that – not only do they help the audience to ignore or cope with metareference, but their own enthusiasm persuades the audience to notice and appreciate it. Beyond the joys of ‘cognitive ping pong’ that some viewers might experience when watching the show, the characters and the way they enable the audience to relate to them, forge a bond that persuades the audience to assume a similar stance of enthusiasm as the characters themselves. The fact that Vince and Howard seem so genuinely excited about what they do, no matter how blunt, obvious or illusion-breaking its effect, instils a notion of tolerance and good-natured appreciation in the audience because Vince and Howard are genuinely likable characters.

In a way, the show’s enthusiasm is therefore contagious – the way Vince and Howard are seen to invest earnest effort into the show and point out and showcase their strategies and achievements with childlike joy and pride does not leave the audience unaffected. The carefree, non-judgemental attitude to convention that permeates the show persuades the viewer to equally cast aside any kind of judgement in favour of simple appreciation. The attitude with which *The Mighty Boosh* highlights its status as an artefact with all its components, be they fictum or fictio related, text-internal or text-external, resembles a celebration of the variety of forms, devices, elements and strategies that can be found across genres and media. The naïve joy with which light is cast on conventions and patterns does not at all have an air of ‘smoke and mirrors’ or ‘it has all been done before’, but one of an innocent rediscovery and re-appreciation of what is often so well-known that it is taken for granted.

What is therefore so fascinating about the abundance of metareferences that can be found in *The Mighty Boosh* is the special way in which they function to reveal the artefact and create media-awareness in the audience: the context of the show enables metareference to develop a function of creating or *reviving*

appreciation of what it foregrounds, of the devices of storytelling and the conventions governing the media. Rather than exhausting all its options in a self-defeating manner, or perhaps escaping into a mood of nostalgia (cf. Böhn, 2007) the show uses the palette of technical devices in a way that breathes new life into well-known strategies and elements and returns to the audience a sense of rediscovery and new enthusiasm for the conscious experience of watching television. The fact that the audience has seen it all before is brushed off as irrelevant to its appreciation. The show takes the viewer by the hand, shows them all its components and bares itself with an air of 'Look at what we did there! Isn't it *fantastic*?'

4.5 A return to the comfort of the fictional

This positive awareness of the fictional, the artificial nature of the show and, by extension, television at large, also casts an interesting light on the idea that *The Mighty Boosh* was (to some extent at least) meant to be a reaction to the wave of realism that had hit the television landscape at the time that it was first created and broadcast in 2004 (Scotsman, 2005). Among programmes like the hugely popular comedy series *The Office*, as well as numerous casting shows and other 'reality TV' formats, *The Mighty Boosh* set itself apart by its radical deviation from a reality-based, mimetic or observational form of entertainment. Rather than imitating the everyday world, Barratt and Fielding wanted to create something escapist that opposed the current trend by placing emphasis on fantasy and imagination (Observer, 2007) instead. When asked, Steve Coogan, who financially supported the filming of the pilot episode of *The Mighty Boosh* and subsequently sold the idea to the BBC, agrees that "[i]t's [...] an appropriate antidote to the trend for super-naturalistic comedy we've seen recently, including some of my stuff." (Observer, 2007).

Not only do Barratt and Fielding achieve this goal of creating something magical, they also create an appreciative consciousness on part of the audience with regard to this anti-mimetic ambition. The audience is persuaded to take pleasure in the knowledge of the fictional, artificial status of the show

and the conventions and devices by which it is achieved. However, if we take into consideration that there is also a level of extracompositional metareference to the show that refers to the show indirectly by inclusion in a broader media category, an interesting implication suggests itself: not only does *The Mighty Boosh* thereby integrate and equalise itself into a category of other texts, but it also expands the statements it makes about itself onto them. In other terms, not only does it say 'I am fiction, I am a television programme and these are the components I consist of', but in combination with its intertextual, text-external meta-elements it simultaneously also says 'And all those other television programmes and film are made of the very same components, and equally fictional'.

In a way, *The Mighty Boosh* re-carves the line between reality and television, clearly marking itself and its fellow television programmes as separate from reality, fictional and constructed. No matter how confusing its textual hierarchies occasionally become or how much doubt is cast on extratextual reality not just being part of an endless *mise en abyme*, the show makes sure that the viewer never forgets that it is all simple fun, fiction and comedy on television. While not every television show might foreground these features and bask in them in the same way that *The Mighty Boosh* tends to do it – or, on the contrary, some might aim to conceal them – the fact that some familiar devices and elements laid bare by *The Mighty Boosh* are still subtly recognisable and discernible underneath the heavy mask of realism of other formats is enough to make the point: television is *never* reality, whether it is as obviously fictional as the Zooniverse or as deceptively realistic as a reality TV programme. Even the way in which some meta-elements in *The Mighty Boosh* appear to question this hierarchy (like, e.g. metaleptic elements that blur the boundaries between text and reality) appear so obvious and contrived that they support this notion rather than seriously challenge it.

Considering the degree to which television and other media have reportedly invaded everyday life, such an overt redefining of the self and of television in general could, in fact, bear outright comfort for some. There might be a sense of safety in watching something that does not pretend to be real or realistic and

does not relate itself to everyday life, but instead allows to move away from reality into something entirely, self-assertedly fictional and constructed. The audience does not have to be cautious about what is fact and what is fiction and how it relates to their own lives, but can instead explore and enjoy hypothetical and textual possibilities for the sake of it. At the same time the frequent intertextual allusions to other television programmes and media implicitly extend this notion onto the media at large and, almost reassuringly, determine that no matter how real(istic) television becomes and how much the boundaries to everyday life seem to disappear, they are still there.

The show can be said to react to a trend in the media of blurring the lines between what is real and what is a mere imitation of the real. In this regard *The Mighty Boosh* is surprisingly critical, even – the temptation to mix up the contents of the television screen and factual reality is exposed as a fallacy (cf. the ‘Mirror of Life’, a moment for which Howard receives severe ridicule), while an appreciation of the overtly unreal is encouraged and celebrated. The show does not, however, express its criticism in a pessimistic manner, on the contrary: with its naïve optimism it does not try to bluntly dismantle the illusion of television, but rather alert the audience to the beauty of the construction and the joy and even comfort that can be got from knowing that the often blurred line between television and reality is still there in a time where television often seems so close to real life that it becomes almost unsettling.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions to be drawn from the examination of meta-elements in *The Mighty Boosh* are manifold – not least due to the fact that the text yields an abundance of metareferential instances to investigate.

The first observation that has been made is that of the complexity of metareference in *The Mighty Boosh*. Rather than a text with an additional meta-message, the show contains self-commentary and self-revealing devices as an integral part of its character. Meta-elements can be found on every textual level, taking on all the shapes and functions defined by Wolf in his model (2009). On both the level of form and the level of content, explicit and implicit metareference can be detected, as well of the *fictum* as of the *fictio* category. Those meta-statements can refer only to *The Mighty Boosh* itself or extend over a larger, more general group of texts. While in most cases, those elements serve to create a humorous effect and elicit laughter and situational comedy, therefore remaining primarily uncritical in nature, there are also instances in which the message takes on a more critical form.

What has also been shown is the interconnectedness of individual meta-elements, to a degree where it becomes difficult or problematic to regard each of them in isolation. Overarching, but rather latent notions of metareference can be ‘activated’ by singular, less subtle instances, or serve as a background against which otherwise in and for themselves rather ‘weak’ meta-elements can become more prominent. Individual meta-statements can also refer to one another or serve to bring the other back to the audience’s mind. It becomes obvious that not only is metareference an essential characteristic component of the show, it is also a highly dynamic and complex one that appears to claim existence in its own right rather than merely with regard to its object of metareference.

One function, or effect, of the show’s metareferentially charged nature is raising the audience’s awareness with regard to the show’s own, structural setup. The

overt existence of textual levels that are hierarchically related, as well as their transgressions, constantly keep the viewer reminded of the madeness and fictionality of the show. Additionally, conventions of narrative genre are exposed and alluded to, plot patterns revealed and the workings of textual devices laid bare. On a text-internal level, *The Mighty Boosh* used metareference to showcase itself as a text in all the shapes that it can possibly take on.

For the viewer this does not, however, result in alienation, but fascination – watching the show's formal metamorphoses becomes as cognitively engaging and entertaining as the content of the story level. The viewer is drawn into a colourful, ongoing rearranging of textual signs and indicators and, in the process, not only becomes aware of the multitude of possibilities and conventions within the structuring of different texts, but also of their own acquired competence in identifying those devices and interpreting those signs. Unlike primarily heteroreferential mainstream television, *The Mighty Boosh* alerts its audience to take conscious notice of their active role in the supposedly passive consumption of watching TV and becomes a rewarding experience of discovery of media competence.

At the same time, *The Mighty Boosh*'s use of metareference influences the approach the audience itself takes to it: Instead of simply laying bare conventions and devices and exposing them as 'old' or unoriginal, the show's enthusiastic attitude invokes a similar mindset in the audience. Rather than leaving the audience to jadedly shrug at an element or textual strategy 'seen before', the show approaches them without judgement and with a positive, childlike appreciation that, in turn, encourages the viewer to adopt the same attitude. In this sense, *The Mighty Boosh* is not only a journey of discovery of own media competence, but also a journey of re-discovery of perhaps long lost appreciation for familiar, '(stereo)typical' elements. Forms, no matter how overused they might seem to the audience, are celebrated – for the sake of their own beauty, that is still there if only one agrees to see it.

Contrary to 'naturalistic' television that seeks to imitate life to a fault and does its best to hide the textual, structural cogs working behind the smooth surface, *The*

Mighty Boosh takes pride and joy in showcasing them. In fact, instead of keeping its surface calm, *The Mighty Boosh* outright pulsates with everything that is going on in its textual depths and it is this very liveliness that becomes fascinating to the audience – whether they like it or not, no viewer will remain unaffected. The show forces anyone to engage with it cognitively, willingly or unwillingly, and it brings back an intensity and activeness to the too familiar process of watching television.

Finally, the text-external dimension of metareference detectable in *The Mighty Boosh* can, on the one hand, be considered an act of integrating the show itself into a larger context, claiming a status equal to other programmes encountered on television. On the other hand, however, it can also be considered an act of equalising the broader television landscape with *The Mighty Boosh* itself. Radically working against an ever-growing tendency of 'naturalistic' and mimetic television and comedy that might constitute a source of discomfort as the boundaries between reality and the media become more and more blurred, the show reassigns a clear status of 'fiction' to its fellow programmes. By employing 'borrowed' devices and laying them bare, the constructedness of not only the show itself, but also of the film, television series or wider genre that the device was taken from is foregrounded and made visible to the audience. The implication is that regardless of the effort a programme might make to conceal its fictionality, it will never truly and fully be real.

Again, this considerably critical statement is not presented with an air of sober disillusionment – on the contrary. *The Mighty Boosh* outright celebrates this fictionality as something desirable that opens possibilities rather than constitute a setback. The show's collective 'outing' of television as 'not reality' can, in fact, simultaneously be considered an homage to the broad range of possibilities offered by the medium of television. With *The Mighty Boosh* Barratt and Fielding have created something that literally and figuratively brings back colour and magic to a television landscape that often does not differ too much from actual reality. They present a colourful overview of the television landscape and use the audience's raised awareness to reintroduce a sense of enthusiastic appreciation for what is nowadays taken for granted far too often. *The Mighty*

Boosh encourages appreciation instead of scorn and promotes an approach that embraces the impossible, the unnatural, the unrealistic and the magical – in short, the fictional.

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VIII. APPENDIX

7.1 Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the multitude of forms of metareferential elements that can be detected in the comedy series *The Mighty Boosh*, and attempts to describe and functionalise them in the context of the 'metareferential turn' that has been observed in the media over the past decades.

From the analysis it can be concluded that *The Mighty Boosh* does not merely employ sporadic meta-commentary to refer to one particular textual or medial aspect specifically, but that metareference in general constitutes an integral part of the show's character. Meta-elements can be found on all textual levels in a variety of different functions. Furthermore these elements are often additionally linked or connected among each other as regards their full function, which renders an entirely isolated analysis of individual instances problematic, if not impossible.

The effect of this dynamic meta-component can, on the one hand, be interpreted within the explanatory framework provided by Wolf (2011), on the other hand, however, its potential extends beyond those outlined boundaries. The combination of *The Mighty Boosh*'s typical, childishly enthusiastic humour and the simultaneous laying bare of its own status as a fictional text embedded in a medial context opens up one other functional potential: that of (re)awakening an appreciation of textuality, fictionality and mediality. This function does not only concern *The Mighty Boosh* itself, but extends onto the media landscape at large. The attitude with which the text approaches itself – benevolent humour and genuine, naïve enthusiasm – is transferred to the audience and enables a conscious, positive and pleasurable reception of the series and the conventions and meta-messages it contains.

7.2 Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit der Formenvielfalt an metareferentiellen Elementen, die in der Comedy-Serie *The Mighty Boosh* zu finden ist, und versucht, diese zu beschreiben und im Kontext der 'metareferentiellen Wende', die in den letzten Jahrzehnten in den Medien zu beobachten ist, zu funktionalisieren.

Aus der Analyse des breiten Spektrums an verschiedenen Elementen lässt sich der Schluss ziehen, dass *The Mighty Boosh* sich nicht damit begnügt, vereinzelte Metakommentare bezüglich eines bestimmten Text- oder Medienaspekts aufzuzeigen, sondern der essentielle Charakter der Serie zu einem wesentlichen Teil aus Metareferenz besteht. Meta-Elemente lassen sich auf allen Textebenen in den verschiedensten Formen und den verschiedensten Funktionen finden. Darüber hinaus sind viele dieser Elemente untereinander verknüpft und in ihrer Wirkung gekoppelt, was eine völlig isolierte Beschreibung einzelner Instanzen erschwert, wenn nicht sogar unmöglich macht.

Der Effekt dieses dynamischen Meta-Anteils lässt sich zum einen im Rahmen von den von Wolf definierten Erklärungsmodellen interpretieren (cf. Wolf, 2011), sein Potential geht jedoch ebenfalls darüber hinaus. Die Kombination des für *The Mighty Boosh* typischen, kindlich enthusiastischen Humors und der zeitgleichen Offenlegung des eigenen Status als medial eingebetteter und fiktionaler Text eröffnet ein weiteres Wirkungspotential: das des Erweckens einer (wiedergewonnenen) Wertschätzung von Textualität, Fiktionalität und Medialität. Dies bezieht sich nicht nur auf *The Mighty Boosh* selbst, sondern auf die Medienlandschaft im weiteren Sinne. Die Weise, in welcher der Text sich selbst gegenüber tritt – mit wohlwollendem Humor und aufrichtiger, naiver Begeisterung – wird auf das Publikum übertragen und ermöglicht ein bewusstes, positives und befriedigendes Auseinandersetzen mit der Serie und aller in ihr rezipierten Konventionen und metareferentiellen Aussagen.

7.3 Curriculum Vitae

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Geboren am 02.08.1988, Klagenfurt

Staatsbürgerschaft: Österreich

Sprachkenntnisse: deutsch (Muttersprache)
 englisch (C2)
 finnisch (B2)
 italienisch (A2)

Akademischer Werdegang:

- 2009- Masterstudium Finno-Ugristik, Universität Wien
- 2008 Erasmus-Semester in Jyväskylä, Finnland
- 2006-2012 Diplomstudium Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Wien
 Schwerpunkt Literaturwissenschaft
- 2006-2009 Bakkalaureatsstudium der Fennistik, Universität Wien
- 2006 Matura am BG/BRG Lerchenfeld, Klagenfurt

Relevante Arbeitserfahrung:

- 2011- Tutorin für die LV "Introduction to the Study of Literatures in English" (SS2011 - laufend)
 Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Wien
- 2011-2012 Assistentin für die Antragsstellung eines Erasmus IPs
 Institut für Finno-Ugristik, Universität Wien
- 2011 Assistentin für das Erstellen und Generieren von MC-Fragen für die STEOP- LV "Introduction to the Study of Literatures in English"
 Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Wien
- 2011 Hilfskraft für das Transkribieren von Gruppeninterviews des Projekts ELDIA (European Language Diversity for All)
 Institut für Finno-Ugristik, Universität Wien
- 2009-2010 Tutorin für die LVen "Finnischer Spracherwerb 3+4" (WS-SS)
 Institut für Finno-Ugristik, Universität Wien

Sonstiges:

- 2010 Leistungsstipendium der Universität Wien nach dem Studienförderungsgesetz (StudFG), finanziert vom BM.W_f